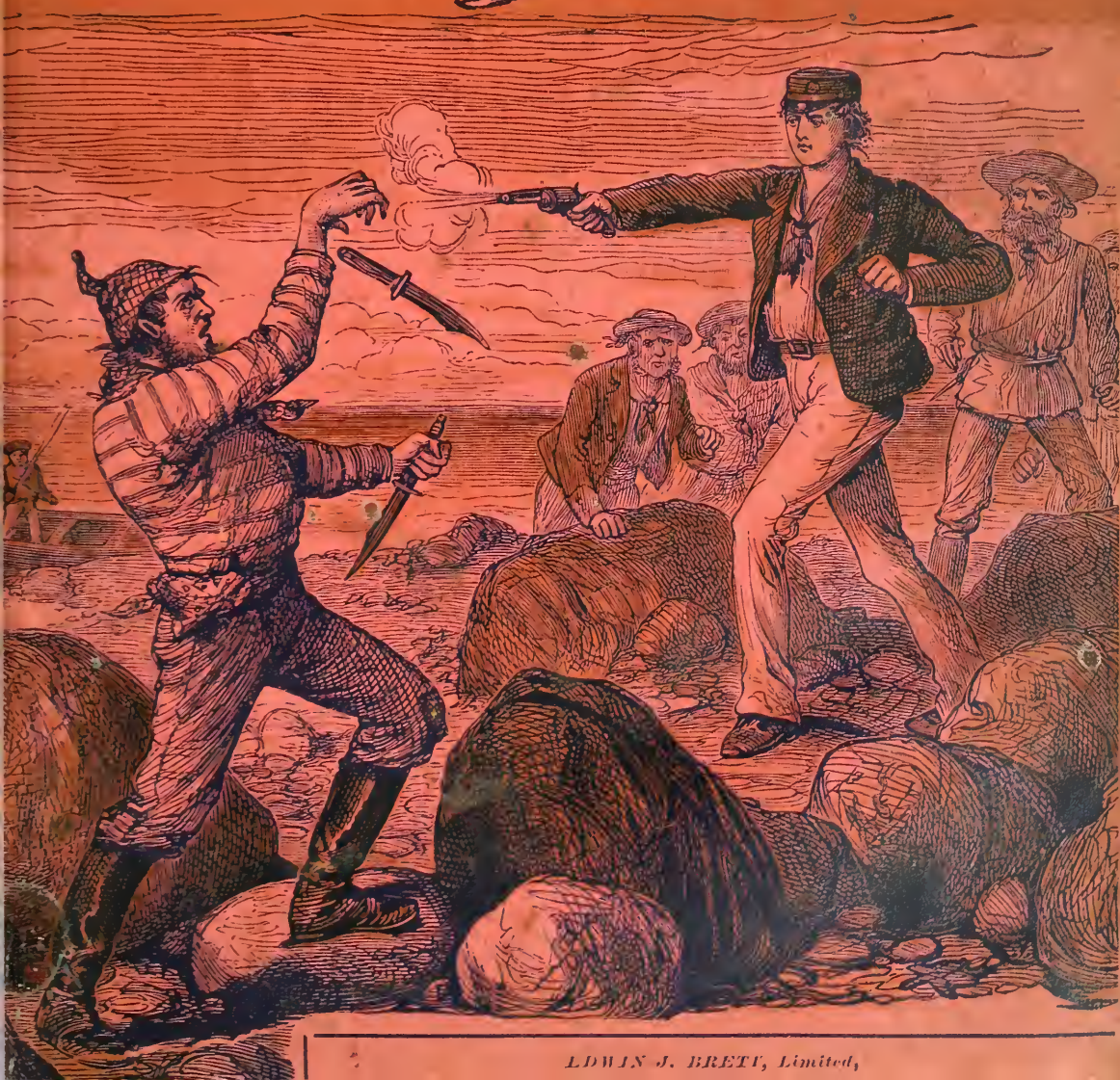
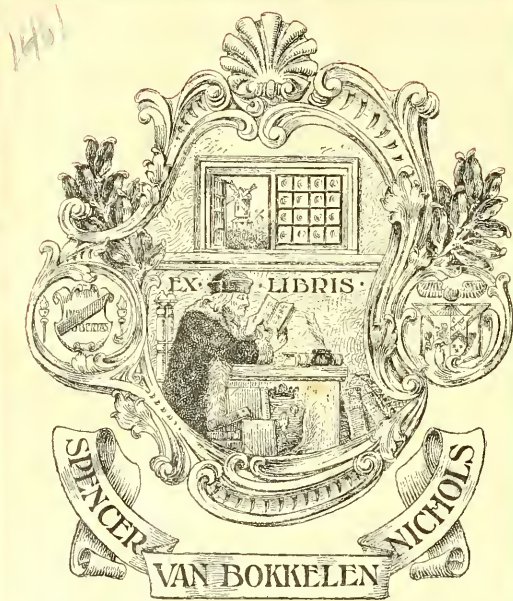


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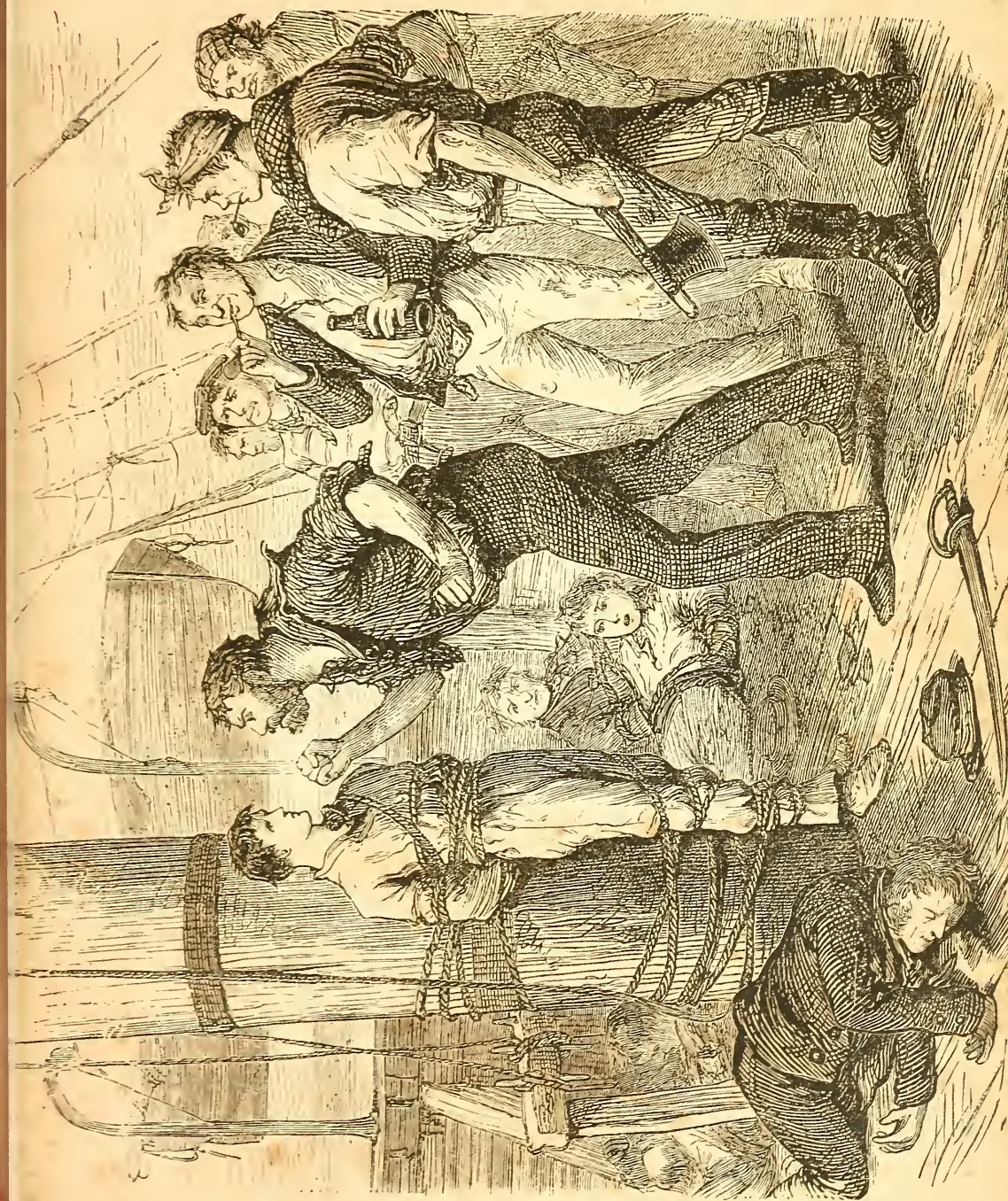


JACK AND HIS SEVEN FOES





JACK & HIS SEVEN FOES.



"DO YOU DEFY ME? BEG FOR YOUR LIFE, YOU CUB!" CRIED THE SWAGGERER.



JACK & HIS SEVEN FOES.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEVEN MEN OF THE "ALBATROSS"—NOT TO BE TRUSTED—JACK HAS A PRELIMINARY BRUSH WITH A FOE.

"It's a solemn truth, cap'en, that I'm afeard o' these men—these seven."

Captain Boldheart, of the "Albatross," looked up from a chart he was examining, and, smiling, said—

"It's not like you, Bob Stubbles, to be afraid of anything."

"No, cap'en," replied the mate, a weather-beaten old tar, who had seen some fifty winters and summers on the sea; "it ain't in my line to be afeard, and it's not of myself I'm thinking."

Bob turned his quid, and, drawing a step nearer, laid a hand on his chief's arm.

"Cap'en," he said, lowering his voice, "if you and I were alone aboard we shouldn't be talking about seven men, or seventy; but there's a pair o' youngsters on the 'Albatross,' that sets a man a-thinking."

"It's kind o' you, Bob, but—"

"Hear me out, cap'en. There's Jack fust—strong and bold as a lion, with the makings of a great man in him. He could take care of himself, on a pinch, perhaps—"

"I'll trust him to do it," said the captain, smiling again.

"But then there's Master Willie," pursued the mate of the "Albatross."

"Him as you brought to sea because he wasn't strong; what could *he* do in a rough-and-tumble fight?"

"Stubbles, what are you talking about?"

"I tell yer, cap'en," said the mate, raising a clenched fist in the air, "that there's mutiny, and murder, and what not aboard!"

"You are too fond of my boys, Stubbles," said the captain, "and make yourself uneasy about them."

"Cap'en," replied the mate, "let us take bearings."

"Well, if you are in for a talk, sit down."

The mate took a seat, and leaning one arm upon the table, extended the other, after the manner of speakers who wish to be impressive.

"How many hands had we aboard when we left London?" he asked.

"Fourteen," replied the captain.

"How many have we now?"

"Twelve."

"And what come o' the other two?"

"Fell overboard, in the night."

"Chucked overboard, I say!" said Bob Stubbles. "I've thought so many a time, and now I'm as good as sure of it."

"Bob," said the captain, rising and pacing the narrow limits of his cabin, "I know you are not given to needless alarms. What has led you to talk in this way?"

"The conduct of these seven men," replied the mate. "We were short-handed when sailing time came, and we took these men on a pinch. They are land-lubbers, every one."

"No sin in that! They've done their work, and some of them have been very apt at learning their duties."

"Too much so, cap'en. There's some of 'em—one in partikler, him as they call the Swaggerer, who wanted to know all about the vessel. He could sail her, if he's a mind to."

"He's a smart man, although a scowling ruffian."

"Cap'en, he's a bad 'un. These men came aboard as strangers to each other, but afore we were half down the Channel, they were as thick as twin brothers, calling each other by their nick-names: the Swaggerer, the Settler, the Bruiser, the Pantaloon, and what

not; and they've kept the'r selves apart as far as they could."

"Well, all that is nothing!"

"But listen, cap'en. When we was in the track of traders, they were civil enough; but since we've been blown out of our course, a change has come over them."

"They have not been so ready, Bob—that's quite true."

"Ready, indeed! No, it's all skulk and scowl with 'em; and day and night, cap'en, their heads are together. And they're a-whispering—whispering like men who hatch the devil's mischief; and I'm afeard they've got arms."

"Which we have not," said the captain. "I've sailed the 'Albatross' these sixteen years, and never wanted such a thing."

"But you'll want 'em soon, I tell you," said Bob, "and I says take time by the forelock, and have their bunks searched."

"I'll think it over," said the captain.

"I like to trust my men as far as I can."

"Trust men any length, but don't give devils an inch," said Bob. "Now here's Master Jack, let's hear what he has to say."

The door opened, and a tall, lithe lad came in, accompanied by a boy of twelve, the two sons of the captain of the "Albatross."

Jack was like his father, dark, with the eye of an eagle, and signs of strength in every movement; but Willie was fair and slender—a delicate, pretty boy, whom one would guess to be like his mother.

He was leaning on Jack's arm, as the weak will lean upon the strong they love. Jack was his idol, his beau-ideal of all that was brave and manly.

"What am I to give an opinion upon?" asked Jack, with a quick look at the faces of the two men.

"Stubbles is doubtful about the honesty of some of the crew," replied his father.

"I have no doubts at all about it," replied Jack. "We have seven scoundrels aboard—knarish curs, who we find beginning to show their teeth."

"Indeed," said the captain, "have they shown the tiger?"

"As Willie and I were walking the deck," said Jack, "that fellow who is called the Swaggerer passed by and pushed rudely against us. It was purposely done, and I called on him to stop."

"Well, what did he do?"

"Went on his way without answering."

"And what did you do?"

"Followed him up, and asked him what he meant by his insolence. He simply said 'Shut up, you cur,' and then I knocked him down."

"It was bravely done," said Willie, with flashing eyes, "quick and straight from the shoulder. Jack's fist—oh, don't I wish I had one like it—caught him between the nose and mouth, and down he went like a big bag of cowardly ruffianism."

"That's just what he is," said Jack, "for he didn't offer to get up, but lay on the deck snarling like a cur; and I've come down to report what happened."

"You did right, quite right, Jack," said the captain. "A knock-down blow was the best thing you could give him, but I had rather you had left him to me."

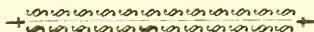
"And you'd 'a' preached him a smart sermon on brotherly love," said Bob, grimly.

"No," replied the captain, fiercely. "I would more likely have pitched him overboard. An insult offered to myself I might forget, but a wrong to my youngsters—never."

"Several of his chums were standing near," said Jack, "and I fancy I saw a movement among them as if they were going to pounce on me, also a look in the Swaggerer's eyes that bade them not do it."

"Whatever is in their mind," said the mate, "he's at the head of it."

"I can believe it," returned the captain. "Now, my dear boys, you go to your own cabin for a little while, and you, Stubbles, send this bold Swaggerer to me."



CHAPTER II.

THE SWAGGERER AND HIS CAPTAIN—THE LAST HOURS OF HAPPINESS ON THE
"ALBATROSS."

THE two lads left the cabin, Jack with his arm affectionately placed round Willie's neck; and Bob went on deck to carry out his orders.

In a few minutes the Swaggerer entered the cabin.

He was a tall, strongly-built man, with a mass of dark hair and a thick bushy beard that grew high up his cheek bones. His features were not ill-formed, but the expression of his face was very sinister, and his forehead was knotted by a perpetual frown.

The shirt and trousers of the sailor were the only garments he wore, and on appearing before his captain he tendered his pretended apology in sailor fashion, but there was more mockery than respect in the action.

The captain of the "Albatross" fixed a keen glance upon him, and his shifty eyes sought the ground.

"You shipped under the name of Hiram Crayton, I believe," said the captain.

"Yes, I did," was the reply.

"Is it your real name?"

A moment's pause, a quick raising and dropping of the eyes, and then his answer:

"What if it isn't? A man can ship under any name he pleases."

"You are not a seaman," said Captain Boldheart, "and you have the tone of a man who has seen better days."

"I have seen them," was the surly reply.

"Well, suppose you have. You must bear with your lot now. Why rebel against your lot? You have been insolent to my son."

"And he knocked me down; that squares the matter."

"It does *not*," said the captain, with sudden anger. "I hear that you are called the Swaggerer. Now understand, I'll have none of your swaggering on board the 'Albatross.' Do your duty, obey orders, and be civil, and all will be well; but show the slightest signs of rebellion, and I will put you in irons."

"I've not rebelled," said the fellow. "I've done nothing except accidentally lurch against that son of yours."

"He has taught you that it cannot be done with impunity," said the captain, "and you have heard me—now go."

The Swaggerer saluted again, and was leaving the cabin when the captain saw something in his profile that dimly recalled something of the past.

"Stop!" he cried.

The Swaggerer stopped and faced about.

"Come nearer to me," said the captain. "Let me have a good look at you. I've not noticed you much before, but now that I look at you I seem to know your face."

"You ought to," was the reply. "I've been two months aboard."

He stood with his eyes down, and evil fires flashing under their lids, while his superior officer looked intently at him.

"No," said the captain, "I can't call you to mind. I must have simply seen you by chance somewhere. I don't know you—go."

The Swaggerer turned away, and as soon as he was outside the cabin, and the door closed, he shook his fist savagely.

"No," he marmured, "I suppose you wouldn't know me; but I'll open your eyes before long, you smock-faced saint, you honest Dan Boldheart, as the fellows used to call you."

And in the cabin the man whom he thus threatened was still musing: "The face is familiar: where have I seen it before?"

It puzzled him sorely, for as the minutes flew by he became more and more convinced that he and Hiram Crayton, *alias* the Swaggerer, had met more than once before.

It was the expression of the man's eyes and the profile that called up something from the past.

But what was it?

Captain Boldheart could not tell, and

finally he put aside thinking and went on deck.

The "Albatross" lay becalmed, and the hot sun, high in the heavens, poured down its beams on the deck. Forward, the men, having nothing to do, had put up an awning, and sat smoking under it.

But they divided into two parties, respectively seven and five in number.

The seven were nearest the captain, and his interest in them being fully aroused, he keenly inspected them as he had never done before.

Seven in all.

First, the Swaggerer, who has been briefly described.

Next, Jim Mark, the Settler, a thick-set, hulking fellow, who, without libelling him, might have been called Jim Black, the convict.

Then Magson—who might have been his first cousin—for some reason known as the Lifter.

By his side lay Dick Dunmore, prizefighter, who, of course, bore the sobriquet of Bruiser.

Next to him Sam Silky, gipsy-like in form and feature, swarthy, lithe, cruel, and treacherous. He, rightly, was called the Panther.

Then came Pharaoh Pipstone, a sinful old fool, with all the vices of hot youth in him. He was the Pantaloon.

And lastly, Walker Dribbles, who always had a cold in his head, and naturally had acquired the name of Sneezer, a slim, lathy man, with a face like that of a baboon clean shaven.

Seven rascals who would, to a man, have taken first prizes at a rogues' exhibition.

Not an eye among them, apparently, was turned towards the captain, and yet his every movement was watched. The Panther could see him out of the corner of his dark, restless eyes, and between his teeth softly hiss out his report:

"He is looking this way; he is frowning; he suspects us. Why not rise now?"

"You are mad!" replied the Swaggerer, in the same low tone. He sat with his back to the captain, and could move his lips safely.

"Am I mad!" returned the other. "We have all knives and pistols; what have they?"

"Hands, strong arms, iron bars, and other things lying about the deck," said the Swaggerer; "and pluck at the back of all. Some of us would be knocked out of the job."

Here Walker Dribble sneezed, and Jim Black, without the slightest ceremony, kicked him in the ribs.

"Keep quiet, can't you!" he said. "If I had a nose like yours, I'd stitch it up with twine. I'd stop its everlasting sneezing somehow."

"If I had a tongue like yours," retorted Dribbles, "I'd give it fourteen years' transportation and no ticket-of-leave."

Something in this answer exasperated Jim Black, and he raised his clenched fist, but a hist from the Swaggerer stopped the blow.

"You mutton-headed sheep-stealer!" he said; "what are you going to do? Wait till we are safe by ourselves before you begin cat-and-dog business! Panther, what's the captain doing?"

"He's done looking at us, and is going below."

"That's right. Is there anybody else near us?"

"Only the five chaps forward."

"What are they doing?"

"Two asleep and three playing 'morris.'"

"Right; then listen. Don't stick your ugly heads together, but look as if we were all dumb men. To-night, lads! you hear—to-night!"

"We hear," they said, softly.

"And now some of you get a bit of a snooze. The fresher you are, when I want you, the better for us all."

The Swaggerer lay back, and, filling his pipe, began to smoke. Two or three followed his example, and the rest took his advice and tried to get a little sleep.

The "Albatross" lay upon the mirror-like deep, as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean.

And the sun baked and blistered the deck as it pursued its even course. There was no work to be done, for during the past three days the "Albatross" had lain thus with an unbroken reflection on the waters.

She was the image of peace and rest; but within her bosom were the spirits of murder, hatred, and revenge.

Bob Stubbles came up on deck two or

three times and lounged about—uneasy in mind, unhappy at heart; but he could see nothing to give him warning of the dread night to come.

The five honest seamen thoughtlessly whiled the hours away with chat and laughter, and such games as they could play.

While the seven knaves lounged and skulked, and smoked and slept.

No warning—not a look or a sound; but Bob could not shake off the dread feeling that was upon him.

When the sun was approaching the west, he went to the captain's cabin again. He found him and his two sons having tea, cheerfully talking together.

"Bob," said the captain, "you come in like a black shadow. What a face you have!"

"Cap'en, I'm oneasy. I admit it may seem weak, but I can't help it. Have the lockers of these men well searched."

"Have they threatened anything further?"

"No, cap'en."

"Nor said or done anything?"

"Nothing, cap'en."

"Then I don't see why we should trouble them, Bob. Stuck fast in the midst of calm, we naturally get gloomy. How's the barometer?"

"High as ever, cap'en."

"Then we are right at present. Have some tea, Bob!"

Jack poured out a cup and he sat down. Pouring his tea into the saucer, he blew hard at it for a minute, then swallowed it all at a gulp, as if it had been an oyster.

"Have a drop of rum in it," said Willie, laughing; "it doesn't seem to cheer you."

"My lad," said the mate, sighing, "all the sperrits in the world wouldn't cheer me. I'm heavy here"—smiting his breast. "I've taken a cargo of lead aboard and ain't got a port to deliver it."

"We have another half-hour's daylight," said the captain, rising. "Come, boys, it is getting cooler; let us take a walk on deck. Have some more tea, Bob?"

"No, thanky, cap'en; but I'll not come on deck at present."

The father and two sons went on deck—a handsome trio; and if there had been such a thing as pity in the hearts of the seven villains, it would have found expression then.

Leaning on Jack's arm, and leading Willie by the hand, Captain Boldheart walked up and down, all his fears and doubts at rest—happy in the society of the only two things left in the world for him to love.

The sun went down and the stars came out, and they were walking still.

"It was on such a night as this, dear boys," he said, looking up at the jewelled heavens, "that your mother died. 'I am sorry to go, Dan,' she said; 'but I know that you will love my children and be kind to them, and that they will love you!'"

Willie laid his cheek against his arm, and Jack brushed a tear from his eye.

"A father so good and kind," he said, "would be loved by any son. We have tried to give you some return for your devotion to us."

"You have done it," answered the proud father, as he pressed Jack's arm and stroked Willie's golden locks. "I would not exchange my lot with any living man!"

"What sound is that?" asked Willie, raising his head.

"Quiet for a moment, dear lads," said the captain.

They all stood still; and sure enough, far away below the horizon, apparently there was a strange moaning sound.

"It is like a wail for the dead!" said Willie, shuddering.

"It is only the herald of the coming wind," replied his father, calmly. "We shall have a breeze before morning. It is time you turned in, dear boys. Good-night!"

He shook Jack by the hand and lightly touched Willie's forehead with his lips. Then they parted, and the boys tripped lightly below; never—oh! never to look upon their father again in the pride of his manhood's beauty and strength; never to hear his tender voice again!

CHAPTER III.

THE IRON HAND—RECOGNITION OF AN OLD ENEMY—THE SPIRIT OF TREACHERY AND CRUELTY ABOARD.

THE two brothers slept in the same cabin in hammocks placed side by side. Jack was a good sleeper, as all healthy youngsters are; but a restless night was a thing Willie was familiar with.

That night, strange to say, he slept soundly, too. The happy frame of mind in which he sought his hammock may have had something to do with it, but in any case he was no sooner in his hammock than he sank into unconsciousness.

The love between these two lads and their father was very strong, passing that of ordinary child and parent. It amounted on both sides to devotion.

And this was why the father had brought his sons to sea with him. Now that their mother was dead, he had need of some solace, and he did not care to leave them with strangers.

Jack was to be trained to become the future master of the "Albatross," and Willie was to keep at sea with his father and brother until he was strong. Then he was to choose a profession.

Not one dreamt of the awful disruption pending, and how their hopes and plans would be scattered to the winds.

In the middle of the night Jack suddenly awoke. The cabin was pitchy dark, and there was a hand feeling over his face.

"Who's there?" he cried; "what is it?"

"It's me—Willie," replied his brother, in trembling tones.

"Are you not well?"

"I am only just awake, Jack; but I have heard such fearful sounds. Listen!"

Jack listened. Above on the deck there was the trampling of feet, then a loud cry, and the fall of a heavy body.

"Something's wrong," cried Jack, tumbling out of his hammock. "But you keep here until I get a light. It may be nothing but the wind getting up and the men setting the sails."

"It's not that," cried Willie. "Oh! hear that."

Oaths, the trampling of feet again, and the fall of a heavy body down the hatchway. It came with a thud against the cabin door.

Jack lit the lamp, and drew on his trousers in a moment. Willie tumbled out also, and began to dress too, and Jack did not check him.

"Keep back a moment, Willie," he said, "and let me see who it is."

He opened the door, and saw the old man, called the Pantaloon, in a sitting position, wiping his face. It was bruised and bleeding.

"What's the matter?" Jack asked.

"The mate struck me with that iron fist of his," was the sulky reply.

"Where's Captain Boldheart?"

"He was on deck a minute ago."

"It's all right, Willie," said Jack, looking back, with a smile upon his handsome face. "Bob Stubbles has been knocking a little discipline into one of the thick heads. Now, old man, go back to the deck."

"I'm going, ain't I," said the Pantaloon, sulkily. "I must get my head a bit, mustn't I? If you got a oner from the mate, I guess you would blink for a month."

"No insolence," said Jack, sternly, "go on deck."

"All right," said the Pantaloon, and with leisurely movements he ascended the stairs.

Jack followed. And as soon as he got his head on a level with the deck, he saw that the stars were fading and daylight approaching.

But he saw no more; for a cruel blow dealt by a cowardly hand with an iron bar scattered his senses and sent him rolling down below.

The Panther and Hiram Crayton, the Swaggerer, bounded after him, and Willie, as he rushed forth in alarm, was seized by the latter with his strong arms.

"Bind that cub," he said, to the

Panther, "and bring him on deck. I'll take the youngster."

"Trust you for taking the lightest job in hand," snarled the Panther.

When Jack returned to consciousness he could at first see things but dimly, a haze was before his eyes, and his head ached as if it would burst. He tried to raise his hand, but it was fast.

A few moments later he knew that he was lashed to the mizen-mast of the ship, and around him was a scene that nearly drove him mad with horror.

Scattered on the deck were five men, dead, with gaping wounds and cruelly battered heads. These were the five seamen who were honest and true.

At his feet, laid there in cruel mockery, was another dead man, so gashed and bruised and beaten, as to be scarcely recognisable, but that it was his dear father, from whom he had but a few hours parted so affectionately, he could not doubt.

Yes, it was he. The cruel and cowardly fiends had done their worst with him. No man could receive such wounds and live.

Jack spoke not. The horror on him was too deep for words. His very soul bubbled and boiled with grief and fury.

Then came thoughts of Willie—where was he?

Not far away, for there was the delicate lad to the left, lying with ropes about him cutting into his delicate limbs, and cruel knots placed where they would give him the most pain.

He was alive, and apparently unwounded.

Close to him was Bob Stubbles, with a terrible gash running across his forehead and cheek, also bound hand and foot, but also living.

"Is this a dream of horror?" asked Jack, faintly.

"It's all true, lad," said the mate, bitterly.

"But don't lose heart, Jack," said Willie, "they can only kill us at the worst."

"I'll not lose heart," said Jack, bitterly. "Let them take my life inch by inch if they will, but you, Willie, poor boy, you are not fit to bear it—and oh! look here!"

Despite his efforts the tears would rain fast as he looked at his father's

corpse, so mangled, so brutally treated. But yesterday living, so good, so strong and handsome, noble and generous, even to the meanest.

"Ah, utter villainy," he groaned.

"My lad," said Stubbles, with a choky utterance, "bear up. Don't let these rats see that they've hit home so hard."

"Where are they?" asked Jack, "where are the dastards?"

"They've been boozing down below," replied the mate, "and seem to have drunk themselves into quiet."

"Oh, that I could free myself of these accursed bonds," said Jack, writhing furiously.

"It's no use, my lad," said Stubbles, sorrowfully, "they've done their work too well. And to think that I taught 'em how to tie those knots. It makes me wish to dash my head against the deck and end it as far as I am consarned. They won't slip in twenty years—only a knife could set us free."

"They are moving below," said Willie. "The Swaggerer said he'd have his drink and come and end us."

"They are coming," said Jack. "Willie, my brother, be strong, be brave."

"I will laugh at them," said the boy, with a proud look on his almost girlish face.

"And you, Stubbles. I know I can trust you."

"If I can only fasten my teeth in any of 'em," growled the mate, "I'll hold on till they hack my head off."

"Quiet, then, dear friend and brother. They are coming up."

There was a shuffling of feet upon the companion, some swearing and pushing, and then they came up one by one, the Swaggerer foremost.

His hair hung about his face, his eyes were bloodshot, and marks of the deadly work he had been engaged in were all over his face. Great patches of red from head to foot—an awful picture of a man-monster.

Behind him was the Panther, licking his cruel lips like a wild beast fresh from a feast of blood, and thirsting for another; then the rest, one by one, blood-stained ruffians every one.

The Swaggerer was a changed man.

There was nothing cringing about him now. He stood on the deck, with

his arms akimbo and his legs wide apart, surveying his victims, living and dead, with a melodramatic air, that would have been ludicrous but for its intense ferocity.

It was too real—too horrible, for there to be any humour in it.

"The two cubs and the family bulldog!" he said, with a snarl. "Well, how fares it with you?"

No answer was given him, and he came forward until he was within a foot of Jack, and thrust his face close to his.

"Will you strike me now?" he asked.

"I would if I could," replied Jack.

"Do you defy me?" cried the ruffian.

"Beg for your life, you cub!"

"Not from you!" said Jack, contemptuously.

"Beg, I say!" cried the Swaggerger, and struck him a blow across the face.

The blood ran from his mouth, but Jack gazed at him dauntlessly.

"You can strike one bound," he said; "but you are too much of a coward to give me one arm free and strike me then."

"One arm free," said the Swaggerger; "that you will never have again. Men do not fight with boys—they thrash them."

And he struck him again.

Jack received the blow without moving a muscle, and Bob Stubbles, carried away by his enthusiastic admiration, involuntarily cried out:

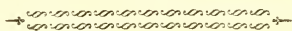
"Bravo, Master Jack!"

"A still tongue with you will be a wise one," said the Swaggerger, turning upon him with a savage frown; "your turn will come directly. So, if I cannot hurt you, you cub of Boldhearts, I'll try what giving pain to another will do."

"Not him!" cried Jack; "he is only a child—delicate and ailing from his birth. Do what you like to me, but spare him!"

"Don't plead for me, Jack," said Willie; "it won't stop the brute."

"You are right, my little cub," said the Swaggerger, with a sarcastic snarl. "Now, lads, up with the youngster, and toss him here. I'll try the beggar, and see the stuff he is made of."



CHAPTER IV.

THE DOOM OF WILLIE AND BOB STUBBLES—"SHARKS, MY LADS, SHARKS!"—
A ROW.

MAGSON, the Lifter, picked up Willie in his arms and carried him towards Hiram Crayton, the Swaggerger.

"Throw him here," cried the leading villain, and the boy was tossed from one to the other like a ball.

Purposely or by accident the Swaggerger let him fall, and he came to the deck with a dull thud, bruising his face, but his lips uttered no sound.

"Unmanly cowards!" cried Jack.

"Bawl away," said the Swaggerger, "it's the only amusement that is left to you."

"Why don't you stick them, and have done with this nonsense?" growled the Panther.

"Or let us make targets of 'em," said Jim Black, the Settler; "we all of us want a little pistol practice."

"Who's leader here?" asked the Swaggerger, turning fiercely upon them.

"Why, you are," replied the Panther, "it's your job from first to last."

"Enough then," said the Swaggerger; "I came on board the 'Albatross' for this hour, and now that it is come I'll not have it marred by anybody."

Turning to Jack again, and placing his foot on the prostrate form of Willie, he went on:

"Hearken to me, you cubs. This thing here," pointing to the body of Captain Boldheart, "was your father—the bitterest enemy I ever had."

"It's a lie!" said Jack; "he was enemy to no man, and a friend to all."

"Hear, hear!" cried Bob Stubbles, "which he was for ever and ever. Amen—so be it."

"I tell you he was my enemy," said the Swaggerger, "but he had forgotten me and the wrong he did me. Years ago we were boys together."

"You mean a boy and little devil together," suggested Bob Stubbles.

"Be quiet," snarled the Swaggerer, "or I will close your mouth for you."

"All right," returned Bob, "heave ahead."

"We were boys together," pursued the Swaggerer, "and were apprenticed together on board the same ship. For three years we were afloat, friends as people believed us to be, but at the end of that time I was, thanks to your father, ruined. My life was blighted, and I have been an outcast ever since."

"I know you now," cried Jack, "you are not Hiram Crayton—it is not your name—you used to be called Norton Gray."

The Swaggerer stepped back a pace, and stared at him.

"So," he said, "your father has been amusing you with my story?"

"You fool," replied Jack, "he has sorrowed over it. You were a thief! You robbed the company and set fire to one of the ships to conceal your thefts. My father caught you in the act, and was compelled to give evidence against you."

"He was not compelled," said the Swaggerer, hoarsely, "he gave it freely."

"He did not," said Jack, "he has told me all. They forced him into the witness-box, and how could he lie there? You were sentenced to ten years' penal servitude, and he has sorrowed over your fate ever since."

"He sorrowed!" sneered the Swaggerer, but his very lips were white with agony, "he laughed at me!"

"You are a mad fool, I say," cried Jack; "he has always spoken of your theft as a sudden temptation, and setting fire to the ship as an act arising out of an agony of shame. He has always been anxious about you, and has tried to find you."

"I say you lie!" replied the Swaggerer.

"He advertised for you only a year ago," said Jack.

"That's true," growled Bob Stubbles, "and he'd have made you first mate of the 'Albatross' if he could only have found you."

"The mother you left to grieve over

your fate," said Jack, "he kept in comfort till she died."

"He only missed you by a couple of days when he went to the prison for you," cried Bob; "he made a mistake of the day when your time was up."

"You two," said the Swaggerer, between his teeth, "have conspired together. This is a lying tale."

"Men do not lie with the shadow of death upon them," said Jack; "I know there is no mercy to expect from you."

"None, none!" cried the villain. "I do not believe your story, and I will not forgive. I will not forego my long-panted-for revenge!"

The veins on the Swaggerer's forehead stood out like knotted cords, and the expression of his features was demoniacal.

"You do believe my story," cried Jack, "and you will not let me live for fear that we should make the world ring with the story of your bitter black brutality. There lies your friend," pointing to his father. "Look into his face if you dare."

"Silence!" thundered the Swaggerer.

"Every gaping wound is a mouth that shall condemn you by-and-by," continued Jack; "they shall darken your waking life, and haunt you in your dreams."

"I'll hear no more," cried the Swaggerer. "You are a liar and a hypocrite, as your father was before you. Up with that family bull-dog there!"

Dunmore and Jim Black raised the mate to his feet, and Dribbles put a life-belt about him.

"I'll not kill any more of you," said the Swaggerer, with a horrible laugh. "I'll be merciful. Here is the younger cub. Put a belt about him—see that the knots are fast—and toss him into the sea."

"This hellish deed shall be avenged," cried Jack, making a fierce but fruitless effort to burst his bonds. "Monster, have you no pity?"

"Pity!" was the contemptuous reply. "Ah, it is stuff that women deal in!"

"I appeal to you all," Jack cried, "you six there. Is there no soft spot in any of your black hearts? Will you stand by and see this devil's work carried out? Will you help in it?"

Not one answered him, and after a moment's silence the Swaggerer pro-

claimed the doom of the mate and poor Willie.

"Go," he said, "and helplessly float upon this lovely sea. The sun shall blister you and create a maddening thirst, but no drop shall moisten your parched lips, no shadow shall shelter you. Perish inch by inch miserably, you bold watch-dog and cub of my false friend, Boldheart. Away with them, lads! I've done with them."

The men were growing sick of the horror of the scene, and taking up Bob Stubbles they carried him to the side.

"Good-bye, Master Jack!" he cried, cheerily.

"Good-bye, dear old Bob, true friend and honest seaman," replied Jack.

Then Willie was taken up, and the agony Jack felt created a raging sea within him. He could feel it surging in his breast like great waves dashing against a rocky shore.

"Villains," he shrieked, "spare that helpless boy!"

"Ask nothing of them," cried Willie, in a clear voice that rang like a sweet-toned bell over the wide sea. "We shall meet again in another world. Good-bye, dear Jack—good-bye!"

"Oh, heaven! can such things be?" said Jack, shivering like one with the ague. "Willie, Willie, my brother!"

Once again he heard: "Good-bye, Jack!" and then there was a splash, and the Swaggerer laughed aloud.

"There's a breeze coming, lads," he said. "Shake out the canvas there. I'll take the helm. Never mind those two living bundles rolling about the sea."

Jack's head was hot with the fever of rage, and a puff of wind came soothingly across his brow. But there was nothing to assuage the agony of his heart, and it was like to burst with pain.

The wind came up quickly, and a brisk breeze filled out the canvas. The "Albatross" heeled over a little, and began to move gracefully through the ruffling water.

The Swaggerer was at the helm, and he and Jack were close together, and face to face.

"Do you wonder why I have spared you?" he asked.

"For some gross cruelty," replied Jack; "to do some deed that fiends would shrink from."

"I have had a feast of blood," returned the Swaggerer, "and want no more. But I am dainty in my meals, and must have dessert. Your fate you shall know soon."

Jack said no more, and the "Albatross" glided on before the wind. Suddenly a cry of exultation from the Panther rent the air.

"See there," he cried, pointing aft, "sharks, my lads, sharks! there's a dainty meal for them in the boy."

"And a tough bit in the old man," grinned Jim Black the Settler.

"Poor Willie!" murmured Jack, with his head drooping; "but perhaps it is better as it is. His misery will soon be over. Brother, dear brother, and you, my noble father, if I escape from these monsters I swear I will bitterly avenge you."

CHAPTER V.

THE SWAGGERER'S LAST WORDS TO JACK—A LOOK NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN.

THE "Albatross" was in the South Pacific Ocean, having rounded the Cape two weeks before the dire events chronicled came to pass.

The breeze that carried her on came from the north-east, and she was heading towards that vast region of water that lies between South America and the Marquesas Islands, a tract of ocean on which vessels were very rarely seen.

Hiram Crayton knew whither he was

going, and had no intention of running the "Albatross" much farther away from the mainland. He was only going far enough to carry out the fell purpose of his heart.

His companions in crime were ignorant of navigation, and they had to trust solely to him. For aught they knew they were sailing homeward.

He had not yet laid his plans before them.

But after two hours' sailing he gave orders for the ship to be brought to, and in a few minutes she lay idly rocking on the ocean, with her canvas flapping against the masts.

"Now, my lads," he said, "come aft, and let us hold counsel. We need not be secret with our young friend the cub, as it is him we are going to talk about."

During the two hours' sailing Jack had never spoken, and he said nothing now.

He only glanced contemptuously at his tormentor, and yet every fibre of his body was burning with pain.

"Boys," said the Swaggerer, "we will moisten our counsels with a little drink. Sneezer, fetch a couple of bottles of wine—the best from the captain's locker."

"He won't object to our drinking his health," said Dick Dunmore, his burly throat swelling with laughter.

Jack gave no sign. Do what they might, they should not wring another word from him.

The drink was brought, and the ruffians drank. The Swaggerer gave a toast—

"Here's to the living and the dead," he said; "good luck attend them wherever they go."

"What the deuce do you mean by that?" asked the Pantaloon, busy draining one of the bottles.

The Swaggerer struck the bottom of the bottle with his open hand, and made it rattle against his teeth in a fashion more musical than pleasant.

The old man blinked and sputtered, and the rest roared with laughter. Any prank played on him, no matter how painful, was sure to be received with grins.

"I mean what ought to be clear to you," said the Swaggerer. "Don't look at me in that way, or I'll rattle your wooden head against the deck. The living and the dead are the father and the son, and they are going to sail the Southern seas together."

All stared now, and the Swaggerer, with a smile of self-approval, proceeded.

"We have had enough of bloodshed; besides, to kill that cub would be to show him merey, and merey to him," with a fierce look at Jack, "I would not

show to save myself from an age of torture."

Jack calmly looked seaward, though his blood boiled with anger, and he was enduring the tortures of the stake.

"The wind has set fair," continued the Swaggerer, "and will, if I know anything of these latitudes, not change for days, or weeks perhaps. We must lash the helm to keep her before the wind, and send him, with the dead for his companions, down the lonely, trackless sea."

"That's very pretty," muttered the Panther; "but what are we to do?"

"We are not more than a hundred miles from land," said the Swaggerer, "and we have two big boats."

"Boats!" said Jim Black; "but who is going to row a hundred miles?"

"It will have to be done," said the Swaggerer, "unless you wish to take the 'Albatross' to some port, and swing for what you have done. So, lads, out with the boats. We will live in one and-tow the other. Take plenty to eat and drink and smoke, and we will have a merry time of it."

They saw there was nothing else to be done, so the boats were lowered, and they were soon busy in filling them with food and drink, and such valuables as they could find.

The cargo of cotton goods and other merchandise was useless to them, and they did not touch it.

While they were thus engaged, the Swaggerer, with a cigar in his mouth, planted himself on a stool in front of Jack.

Their eyes met, one showing a fiendish joy, the other quiet scorn.

"So, youngster," said the Swaggerer, "you expect me to believe this story of your father's love for his old chum?"

He did believe it, and Jack saw his belief in his eyes.

There was no need to answer him, and he said not a word.

"It's all a lie—a lie!" hissed the Swaggerer; "it isn't in man to be so generous. We are all for number one."

Not a word—only those quiet determined eyes looking into his.

The steady look made him shift his position, so that there was no reason for him to look Jack full in the face.

A coward at heart, he could not do it.

"All for number one, I say," he cried, "and the strongest wins the day. I am the strongest now."

He took another look at Jack, and saw that those quiet eyes, so full of meaning, still rested upon him.

But the boy's tongue—he was little more than a boy—uttered never a word.

If the mad fool, steeped to the very lips in crime, could have read what was in that look of Jack's, he would have killed him then; but he was blind to its full meaning.

He saw nothing of the possible future, of the time to come when Jack would be a terror to him even in his dreams.

Only his satisfied thirst for vengeance occupied his thoughts.

"Silence," continued Hiram Crayton, "gives consent, they say. You do not deny my accusation. You have lied."

Not a word, not a movement, only the look so full of meaning, so pregnant with a terrible settling-day to come.

The boats were now ready, and the Pantaloon came up to acquaint his leader with the fact.

The Swaggerer arose, and was turning away, when a sudden fit of fury laid hold of him, and swinging round, he dashed his burning cigar in Jack's face.

"You liar!" he cried, and then he spurned the dead body of Captain Bold-heart with his foot.

"That is my answer to all the lies I've been told," he said.

The eyes of Jack were still upon him, and they followed him to the helm, and never moved from his face while he lashed it up to keep the vessel before the wind, before which the "Albatross" was put again.

He affected to ignore that look, but frequently glanced furtively at Jack to find him unchanged.

At last all was ready, and the "Albatross" was moving on again slowly before the gentle breeze.

The men dropped one by one into the boat, holding on with a running rope until the Swaggerer joined them.

He was in no hurry to go. He was not going to be frightened away by a look, that, despite himself, pierced his soul to its darkest depths—not he.

No; he had done his work, and could take his own time to quit his ghastly workshop.

Standing up with his legs wide apart, he lit another cigar.

"Your father's favourite smokes," he said.

No answer from Jack, but those eyes were still upon him, and after a fruitless effort to give Jack a defiant stare, he climbed over the side of the vessel and dropped into the boat below.

"Give way," he cried, "and let us leave that accursed ship behind us."

And then the six men bent to the oars, each and all as glad as he to put a gap between them and the "Albatross," with its burden of living and the dead.

CHAPTER VI.

LAND REACHED BY THE SEVEN—A WELCOME UNDESERVED—A SAIL AND SURPRISE.

"THREE days cramped up in this beggarly boat and no land."

It was Dribbles who whined out this complaint, and it was echoed by Pharaoh Pipstone the Pantaloon.

"Some blunder's been made here; my limbs are stiff, and I can't stand much more of it."

"It's my belief," growled Jim Black, "that we ain't going towards land, but away from it."

"Oh, don't say that," groaned Dribbles, and forthwith began to sneeze violently.

Mr. Swaggerer, who lay asleep in the stern of the boat, was awoke by these nasal explosions, and, rising, he sat up.

"What's the matter there?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied Dribbles.

"Don't lie," was the rejoinder, "you never sneeze for nothing. That nose of yours is like a second tongue—it shows what's going on inside of you."

"Well, I was just saying that we haven't reached land yet."

"And we shan't reach it for a month if you lazy devils don't pull better.

Put yourselves into harder work, and you will be there by sunset."

"It would do us good to see you put yourself into it," said Jim Black.

"I daresay it would," was the answer; "but I am leader, and my work is to give orders. We've come along well."

"Specially since we've had the wind at the back of us," said the Pantaloon.

"Curse the wind!" snarled the Swaggerer, "who would have thought that it would play us such a prank? It's possible, lads, that it may bring the 'Albatross' round our way."

"Oh, Jiminy!" exclaimed Walker Dribbles, and then he had another fit of sneezing.

"It is possible, I say," said the Swaggerer, with a backward, nervous glance at the horizon; "but it wouldn't matter. The cub is dead before this."

"I fancy I see him," groaned Dribbles, and then off he went again.

The Swaggerer picked up a log of wood, and threw it at him.

Dribbles ducked his head like lightning, and the Pantaloon got the log in his ribs.

With a howl he rolled to the bottom of the boat.

"Just like the old man," said Jim Black, "allus in the way."

"You were talking of land," said the Swaggerer, standing up and shading his eyes with his hand, "and there it is."

They looked round and saw what seemed like a bank of cloud peeping above the horizon.

Some were doubtful, and got cursed for their pains.

"I tell you that it is land," said the Swaggerer; "give way, and we shall be inshore before night."

Refreshed and stimulated by these tidings, they bent to their oars, and Hiram Crayton leant back with the tiller-ropes in his hands and a cigar in his mouth.

They pulled, and pulled, until he bade them rest, with the air of a master releasing serfs from duty.

Then they looked round and saw the land well defined before them.

A shout of joy burst from their lips, and after a drink of rum-and-water, they went to work again.

Ere long the Swaggerer bade them rest again, and when they looked to-

wards the shore they saw a hilly country a little more than two miles away.

And on the beach there were a number of wooden huts, and men in civilised garb were running to and fro.

"Now, lads," said the Swaggerer, "remember the story we have to tell. The 'Albatross' sprang a leak and went down in the night. We escaped as we could, and don't know what became of the rest."

"That's the yarn," they clamoured, and then they pulled in, and in a quarter of an hour the boat grounded on the beach.

Immediately a number of men in coarse canvas attire surrounded them. They smelt strongly of hides and tallow, and their calling was sufficiently indicated by a number of buffalo and cattle skins stretched upon the beach to dry.

They were a little colony of hide-tanners, who prepared the skins brought in by the natives, and the life they led was a very quiet one.

Twice a year a ship came to take away the prepared skins. All the rest of the time they saw nobody but themselves and the semi-savage hunters, who brought in at odd times the results of their labours.

Eagerly they questioned the seven mock survivors of the "Albatross," and listened to the lying yarns that were poured into their ears.

Rough but honest, and full of goodwill, they grasped the blood-stained hands of the ruffians, and bade them welcome.

"Such as we have," said one, who appeared to be leader, "is yours. Welcome, brothers all."

And this he said with all the heartiness of honesty, little dreaming of the true character of the seven.

With rugged hospitality they laid out their best upon the beach, and bade them eat. There were fish, flesh, and fowl, and ship's biscuit, but no strong drink.

Of this, however, the seven had a store.

"The sun shines almost always here," said the leader of the settlers. "We live in the open air and sleep on the sands nine months of the year."

They had, however, a number of huts, before alluded to, mainly used for the

storing of hides; but they cleared one of the largest, and cleansed it for their guests, and tossed down heaps of skins and soft hides for them to sleep on.

The seven were like lambs. They were mildness itself, and, led by the Swaggerer, affected to be overcome by the hospitality they received.

Night soon came, and they retired to their hut, and lay down to talk of their prospects in whispers, and, shame upon them, to mock and jibe in secret at their simple entertainers.

By-and-by, when tired of this, they lay down and slept, even as honest men do.

For repose will come to the unjust, even as rain falls upon them. With health, sleep will come to the sinner, as well as to the saint.

Early in the morning there was a commotion on the beach, and men were heard crying out to each other.

The Swaggerer, the first to awake, rose and went out.

The settlers were gathered together, and one of them was pointing to the south. The Swaggerer joined them.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A sail!" they cried.

He looked, and some five miles away beheld a ship coming on with her head to the shore.

"Who is the captain of that craft?" asked one. "He must be mad. She will be aground soon."

The Swaggerer made no answer, but his very lips and throat were white.

He knew that craft, and an icy chilliness crept over him.

It was the "Albatross!"

Yes, there she was, close on his trail, as if she had been a thing of life bent on hunting him down.

He saw his danger, and already he was scheming to avert it.

The wind, veering slowly round, had evidently taken the vessel with it, and the "Albatross," with her lashed helm, had obeyed its influence as well as if there had been a living crew aboard.

She would come ashore, and tell the true story to these honest men.

What then?

The Swaggerer reckoned their numbers, and saw they were at least three to one, and they might be armed. Fighting would be indiscreet, but whither could he flee?

Already the men were moving towards the spot where the ship would ground.

They reckoned it would be six miles down the coast, making due allowance for the tide.

For a moment the Swaggerer was left alone, and he turned his despairing eyes around.

Close behind was Walker Dribbles, just aroused, and walking sleepily along.

"Come here," he said.

"What's the row?" yawned Dribbles.

"Come here, you sleepy, sneezing brute," he hissed, "or I'll knock your head off."

Dribbles hastened to obey, and the Swaggerer seizing him by the arm with one hand, pointed towards the ship.

"See that?" he cried.

"Yes," replied Dribbles, "I see it."

"And don't you recognise it? It is the 'Albatross,' you fool."

Immediately the knees of Dribbles bent, and his nose went up in the air preparatory to sneezing; but the Swaggerer, with a back-handed blow on the man's chest, stopped that performance.

"Listen to me," said his companion.

"It's plain to me that the 'Albatross' has nobody on board but those we left there—"

"The living and the dead," Dribbles said.

"Don't interrupt me, you cold-catching, fiddle-headed fool! None but the dead may be there. If so, we may yet avoid exposure. We must deny the identity of the dead."

"That won't do," said Dribbles. "Who would believe you?"

"Leave it to me," the Swaggerer hissed. "Say nothing. Now follow up with me, and let us see what takes place. If the coast there is like what it is here, she will come right in before she gets aground. Any of that lot who can swim fifty yards will be able to get on board."

"I wish him joy," said Dribbles, shivering.

"If the cub is living, they will bring him ashore. Should he be alive, the worst will be known. We must run for it then."

They were walking on as they talked, keeping about two hundred yards in the rear of the body of settlers, who were



"HIS CLENCHED HAND STRUCK THE VILLAIN IN THE FACE."

too eager in their quest of the ship to heed them.

So they went on for miles down the beach.

For the most part they journeyed over smooth sands, but here and there they came to clusters of rocks that were rougher going. At last they were within hailing distance of the "Albatross," and the settlers were shouting to anyone that might be on board.

No answer came back, and soon she grounded with a grating noise, and heeled over to an angle of forty-five.

The settlers ran down close to her, and the Swaggerer and Dribbles lay down among some broken rocks to watch.

One of the men threw off his upper garments and plunged into the sea. A couple of minutes' sturdy swimming brought him close to the side of the "Albatross."

Then the watchers heard him shout again.

But there was no reply.

"The cub is dead," said the Swaggerer, scornfully. "Shout louder, my honest fellow."

The man began to swim round the vessel, and ere long he espied a rope, which he seized and clambered on board.

A moment's pause, and then another cry was heard.

And what a cry it was!

No cheery shout, but the hoarse scream of a horror-stricken man.

They saw him run across the deck and thrust his white face over the side of the vessel nearest the shore.

A few words from his lips, and half of his comrades threw up their arms in horror; then some plunged in and also clambered on deck.

A small boat had been left behind by the mutineers, and this, with blanched faces, they saw lowered. Then a form was slowly brought across the deck and handed down to some of the men who had leaped in.

The Swaggerer drew a revolver from his breast-pocket and cocked it.

"As well to be ready," he muttered; but Dribbles, sneezing and shuddering, turned away.

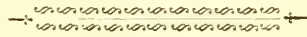
The boat pulled quickly to the shore, and the settlers lifted out their burden. The light of the morning sun fell upon his face.

The Swaggerer saw that it was indeed Jack, but whether he was living or dead he could not tell.

"Run, you white-faced hound!" he said to Dribbles. "Warn the others. Tell them that the cub is here. I'll follow quickly as soon as I see what ought to be done."

"But why do you stay?" Dribbles asked, with chattering teeth.

"If he is alive," said the Swaggerer, "and I can get near enough to him without being suspected, I'll put a bullet through his head, and chance what follows!"



CHAPTER VII.

THE ALARM—NOTICE TO QUIT—THE STRONG HAND OF HONESTY—FLIGHT.

WALKER DRIBBLES hurried back as quickly as his shaky limbs would allow, but his white face and uncertain footsteps gave him the appearance of a drunken man running away from a ghost.

And, indeed, there was a grim spectre behind him.

There was no lack of evil in him, and he could share in a dark deed without any pity for the victim; but he was a born cur, and the probable consequences to himself troubled him sorely.

"It's unnatural for that ship to follow

us up," he muttered. "There's something uncanny in it, and we are all doomed men."

He finished off with a sneeze that seemed to lift him off his feet, and hastened on. The hut was reached, and opening the door he bounded in.

The Pantaloon was just coming out, rubbing his eyes, and Dribbles and the old sinner went down together.

"Here! who is it? What's up?" roared the Pantaloon, fiercely clutching him by the throat. "Up, lads, the enemy is upon us!"

The other four, more or less awake, bounded to their feet, and fell upon the hapless Dribbles.

He would have been a dead man if he had not succeeded in shaking himself free from the Pantaloon's grasp, and bawl out—

"It's me—the Sneezer! Hold hard, I've just come in!"

Knives were put back, and revolvers repocketed, as the men with laughter threw themselves down again.

"And why didn't you say who you were," grumbled the Pantaloon, "instead of flying at a fellow like a wild cat? Old Pharaoh Pipstone is no mouse for you to deal with."

"I came in rather hurriedly, because I've news for you," said Dribbles. "Atchew!—atchew!—atchew!—news—atchew!—that will make all your hair—atchew!—curl."

"Out with it," cried Jim Black.

"I will in a minute," said Dribbles; "but, really, whenever I'm excited, this nose of mine—atchew!—atchew!—oh, dear me! — atchew! — the news — atchew—"

"Somebody lay hold of his nose and stop that game," cried Dick Dunmore.

"I'll do it," said Magson, and his finger and thumb closed on the nasal organ of Dribbles like a vice.

"Oh, don't — let go!" Dribbles gasped. "I couldn't speak if you hold on like— Oh, let go!"

"Your news," grunted Magson, like a bulldog.

"The 'Albatross' hab cub in," said Dribbles.

"The what, you fool?" cried Magson, leaving hold, and staggering back. All the rest stared.

"The 'Albatross,'" said Dribbles, "atchew!—she's lying ashore, six miles away—the men here have gone down to her—atchew!—and are bringing young Jack Boldheart this way."

"Why, this is news!" cried Jim Black. "Where's the Swaggerer?"

"He's down there watching, and will come soon—atchew! Oh, dear me, all the fat is in the fire, and we are dead men."

"Who talks of being dead men?" demanded Hiram Crayton, as he threw open the door, and stalked in.

"It's the Sneezer been dreaming,"

replied Jim Black; "he says the 'Albatross' has come in."

"And so she has, lads," said the Swaggerer; "the wind served us a scurvy trick by veering right round—but what of that?"

"She's a dumb thing," said Jim Black, "but her tale is written on her deck."

"What of that, Jim?" cried the Swaggerer, raising his voice, and frowning on all round; "what need have we to fear this tale here?"

"The fellows outside may cut up rough."

"Let them. They have no arms, and there's none aboard the 'Albatross.' We'll put a bold face on it. Boldheart's cub is just alive, and no more."

"Alive or not," said Magson, "you can't deny that it's an awkward business."

"And you would have your way," said Dunmore; "we wanted to scuttle the ship."

"And you funk'd settling the youngster," added Jim Black, "so don't deny it."

With a bullying air, the Swaggerer turned from one to the other, frowning heavily as they reproached him in turn.

"Well," he said, "have you finished?"

"Yes," said Jim Black, "I've done."

"And you'll follow my lead?"

"You got us into this hole, get us out of it," was the surly reply, and there was muttering all round.

The Swaggerer glared around him for someone on whom to vent his fury.

He chose the Pantaloon, who was mumbling and nodding his head like the figure of a Chinaman in a tea-shop.

A blow straight from the shoulder sent him into a corner, and the next moment Walker Dribbles was bundled on the top of him.

"Grunt and grumble, would you?" cried the Swaggerer; "a pretty pack of cowards to be leader of! If any of you want to join the lot outside, go and do it."

"No," said Jim Black, "that won't do; we must sink or swim together. Listen! there's somebody coming."

A dead silence fell upon them all, and a knock at the door was for a moment unanswered.

It was Dunmore who said, "Come in."

The door opened, and the head man of the settlers stood between them and the light of the morning.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with an honest sunburnt face—thirty years of age, perhaps, but looking older.

"I want a word with you men," he said, sternly, gazing round upon the shrinking crew. "I want a word with you, I say, and, what's more, I mean to have it!"

The Swaggerer was the first to speak.

"You can have twenty words if you like," he said.

"I can see that I've nothing to tell you," said the man, "and you can guess why I am here."

"We are none of us good at guessing," said the Swaggerer, with a defiant scowl.

"My name is Jacob Sturmby," said the man, "and that name has never been stained with crime."

"Nobody said it had," cried Jim Black.

"And what's more, I can't breathe the same air with them who live by foul ways," pursued Sturmby; "therefore I say to you, one and all—clear out."

"There's no objection to your saying it," said the Swaggerer, with mock politeness; "but of course we shall consult our own convenience about going."

"I'm afraid that we must hurry you."

"Don't threaten—you have no weapons."

"None but the things we use in our trade, our strong arms, and the stones that are lying about the beach," said Jacob Sturmby. "But we'll make 'em enough, perhaps."

"Look here," said the Swaggerer, "you're no match for us, so don't try the bragging game. We could shoot you down like rabbits in a warren. I've covered you now. What if I fire?"

"To you and them as came with you," said Sturmby, unmoved, "we gave our best. We took you in as strangers cast among us, friendless and poor. If you can find the heart to put a bullet in me, do it."

The Swaggerer was not proof against his simple bravery. He lowered his weapon.

"Understand us," he said, "we don't want to harm you. But you've got a lad with you who is a bitter enemy of mine. Give him to us."

"And suppose I don't?"

"Well, make up your mind for anything. We are not the men to stick at trifles."

"So you would have me give up this poor lad to you?" said Jack Sturmby, slowly.

"Give him up, or toss him back into the sea," replied the Swaggerer.

"Then my answer to you is this," said Jacob Sturmby, and with two quick strides he was close to the Swaggerer.

Like a quick flash of light, his clenched hand struck the villain in the face, and dashed him to the ground.

Then in a moment the door was closed, and he was gone.

"The fiends seize him!" cried the Swaggerer, leaping to his feet again.

Revolver in hand, he dashed to the door, and opened it. An unexpected reception awaited him.

A shower of stones poured down upon him, and rattled against the door like hail.

Hurriedly he reclosed the door, and a loud shout without proclaimed the triumph of the settlers.

"We are boxed in like rats in a cage," said the Swaggerer, with an oath.

"Then let us make a rush for it," said Jim Black.

"They are three to one!"

"We ought to be able to fight ten to one, revolvers and knives against stones."

"We can't fight," the Swaggerer said; "it would be a waste of time, and some of us might come to grief."

"Well, if you are afraid—"

"I'm not afraid. I only wish to be prudent. The cub is alive, but he shall not live—I swear it. We have bungled once, but won't do so again."

"If you can't fight," asked Dunmore, "what will you do?"

"Run for it," replied the Swaggerer. "I've taken the bearings of the land. Close behind us here is a thick wood. We'll make for that. Men have lived in a wood before, and can do so again."

"It's the only thing to be done, I suppose," said Dunmore, with a sullen face; "a pretty mess you've made of things."

"Now, all out together," said the Swaggerer, "sharp to the left, then round the hut, and with our faces to these beggars, we'll work our way to the woods. Who follows me?"

Walter Dribbles and Pharaoh Pipstone, the Pantaloon, would fain have remained under the friendly shelter of the hut, but that would put them at the

mercy of the foe. So they fell in with the rest.

"All close together," said the Swaggerer, "and smart round as soon as we are outside."

He threw back the door, and they all rushed out.

Immediately a yell greeted them, and the stones came down like hail.

CHAPTER VIII.

JACK AND THE SETTLERS—A STORY TOLD AT SUNSET—CLEANSING BY FIRE.

THE Swaggerer, nimble of foot, succeeded in getting his comrades into the position of protection for himself, and escaped further hurt, but some pretty stiff blows were received by the others.

Jim Black got a stone on the jaw that made his teeth rattle like dice in a box; Magson was cut on the head, and Dunmore's ribs were pretty well knocked about by some half-dozen pieces of red sandstone.

The Pantaloon was hit a little lower down—just where he wore a belt, and in a breathless condition staggered after the others.

Walker Dribbles was unhurt until the party had retreated round the hut, where they paused a moment to regain breath.

The delay was fatal to Dribbles, for a stone about the size of an ostrich's egg came curving over the roof and lit fairly on his head.

He fell in a heap, with all Nature around him heaving and tossing before his eyes.

Thus he would have remained, but for his comrades, who lifted him up, and dragged him with them.

The wood was about a quarter of a mile away, and they covered that distance at a smart pace, followed by the settlers, who were only prudent in not coming too near. Unarmed, they could not be expected to face revolvers.

The retreating party yelled and fired; the others shouted, but no great harm was done on either side.

When the wood was reached, the fight for the time was over.

Retreating to the wood, the seven foes of Jack sat down to wipe their bleeding

faces, rub their bruises, and to curse the successful foe.

The greatest sufferer was the Pantaloon, who was ghastly white with pain and malignity.

He snapped like a cur-dog at the air as he rubbed his stomach and groaned.

"Our stay with our friends has been short," said the Swaggerer, "but we will return anon."

"I vote we go forward," said Jim Black. "I, for one, don't want to bother any more about this business. Who will turn it up with me?"

"Weigh well what you do," said Hiram Crayton. "Remember that young Jack could hang every man of us."

Men of their stamp are best governed through their fears, and they yielded to his arguments and persuasions.

It was settled that they should wait until night, and make at least one more effort to get rid of the living witness against them.

"That done," said the Swaggerer, "we will away."

"But where shall we go?" asked Jim Black, and to his query there was no answer.

Meanwhile the sturdy band of honest men devoted themselves to Jack, whom they had brought ashore literally on the very point of dying.

A strength passing that of mortals generally, had held him up during those days of agony at sea.

During the burning days and dark nights he had heard no sound but the surging of the waves, and the sighing of the wind, and seen naught but the ghastly deck before him, and sea and sky.

No food eased the craving of hunger, or water passed his parched lips. His agony cannot be described, and only faintly imagined.

He hoped for a time that some passing vessel would see the "Albatross," and come to his rescue, and one indeed, unseen by the villains, did cross his track.

But the "Albatross" was not a wreck. She had all her sails set, and, with lashed helm, kept in her course; and with an anguish that can only be faintly imagined, he saw the stranger pass by.

That night he despaired, and wept bitterly; in the morning he was light-headed, and had visions of men walking on the sea.

He saw his father, his brother, and Bob Stubbles, the mate, walking hand-in-hand, and cried out to them aloud.

They smiled upon him, and beckoned, but kept away, and by-and-by faded in the distance.

"Deserted by all," cried Jack, "I am left to die."

The events of the past hours never entirely left him. They were felt to the end until he became insensible. He had been as one dead for five hours when the "Albatross" grounded.

His rescuers succeeded in restoring him to consciousness, but at first he did not speak. They were no more real to him than the shadowy forms he had seen upon the sea.

"It is all a dream," the boy thought, "and by-and-by I shall awake on board the "Albatross," and find father and Willie alive and well."

Vain hope! all was too real.

They laid him in one of their huts that opened seaward, and the cool, refreshing breeze gradually restored his lost wits.

By degrees everything came back, and with it a trembling that threatened dissolution.

They had brought some spirit from the "Albatross," and Jacob Sturmby gave him a little diluted with water.

He swallowed it slowly, and then spoke for the first time; but he did not know his own voice, so changed was it.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"On the southern neck of California," replied Jacob Sturmby. "This place is

known as Tallow Bay, at least, that's the name we give it."

"And you saved my life," Jack said.

"My lad, we've done our best."

"I thank you."

He lay back, and closed his eyes to think.

So it was all real. The awful death of his father and brother were not things he had dreamed of, but the sad, terrible reality. The sufferings he had endured were not the offspring of fancy, and he had lived through it all.

For what?

Vengeance!

So strong a hold upon him had the thirst to avenge, that ere he could partake of food, he was thinking of his foes.

One and all should die.

He would be the medium of the earthly retribution, and as they had meted out suffering, so should it be measured to them again.

"I will live," he said, and with that resolve, forced himself into calmness, lest his passion should kill him, and his foes live triumphant.

He knew nothing of their being so near him, and it was owing to the wisdom of Jacob Sturmby that he was kept in ignorance of it.

"If the lad heard of it," he said to his comrades, "he might die of mortal terror."

It was a natural thought, but he under-estimated Jack's spirit. He would not have died of terror, but the feeling of impotent fury that would have laid hold of him might have been fatal.

When the seven were retreating, Jack heard their happily fruitless firing, and unmusical yelling. His eyes asked what was going on, and Jacob Sturmby answered him—

"It's only a birthday we're keeping, and when we get on high jinks, we are rather noisy."

"It is my birthday," said Jack; "yesterday I was dead—to-day I live again."

His recuperative powers were marvellous. When evening arrived, he could sit up a little, and he told them the story of the ghastly mutiny and murder on board the "Albatross."

It was a strange, impressive scene.

The handsome boy, but a shadow of his former self, sat propped up at the door of the hut, the men sitting and lying in a double circle around him.

Straight ahead was the sun sinking in the sea, high in the sky great patches of red clouds, and every wave tipped with scarlet.

The vivid light lay on the face of the boy, on the hut, and on every rock upon the shore.

It seemed as if all Nature was for the time dyed with blood.

The men heard the story, and no sound broke from them until it was all told.

Then they rose up with wild eyes, and their very hair stiffened with fury.

Some took up big stones and dashed them into the sea, others shook their fists in the air, and the rest walked up and down in uncontrollable agitation.

Jacob Sturmby alone among them remained quiet.

"My lad," he said, "you ought not to have spoken of this to-night. It has tried you sore. Let me carry you in."

He lifted up Jack, who indeed was ghastly pale and trembling again, and carried him inside the hut.

Then he laid him down on a soft couch of skins, and closed the door.

"We'll not talk of this again for a week, at least, my lad," he said; "try to forget it."

"How can I forget?" asked Jack, with a wail.

Jacob lighted a spirit-lamp, and hung a kettle over it. As soon as the water boiled, he made Jack some tea, and soaked a little biscuit in it.

Jack ate and drank, not because he had any appetite, but because he was resolved to live.

Ere long he lay down and fell asleep, and Jacob Sturmby having assured himself that he was really sleeping, softly left the tent.

On the beach he found the men in knots, still discussing the story they had heard.

"Lads," he said, "I have a little bit of work for you to do, but it must be done quietly."

They gathered around him, and looked with interest on his pallid face, made more impressive by the light of the moon that fell upon it.

It was not until that moment that he showed how deeply he had been moved.

"We have listened to a story to-night," he said, "and I'll not say much about it. We have felt it. It has touched us to the quick, and I for one will not spare one of those hellish villains if ever I get them in my power. Silence! Don't cry out, the dear lad is sleeping."

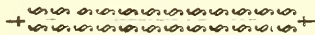
He held up his hand to check them, for they, too, were ready to cry out in chorus that they were as ready as he to do this work of vengeance. Lowering his hand, he pointed to the hut.

"Lads," he said, "they have rested there, these unspeakable villains. Is it fit that anything living should seek shelter from such a place?"

"No," they murmured.

"Burn it, then," he said; "but do it quietly."

And turning away, he went back to the sleeping boy.



CHAPTER IX.

A FOUL ATTEMPT FOILED—JACK'S LIFE ON SHORE—A START IN SEARCH OF THE SEVEN.

THE men did their work well. They brought a lot of brushwood and bits of timber, and laid great heaps on every side of the hut. On the top of all they tossed great pieces of fat and tallow, so as to have a merry blaze.

No man entered the hut to remove anything. The skins on which the band of ruffians had slept were to be burned also.

"The only pity is," said one man, "that we haven't got the blackguards inside, too."

Quietly they made their preparations, so as not to disturb Jack; and the Swaggerer, who, with Jim Black and Dunmore, were stealing down from the wood, failed to perceive what was going on.

They could see the men were moving about some distance from the hut where Jack was lying.

They could tell where that was by the glare of the light shining through the opening that served for a window.

"He is alone," said the Swaggerer, "or, at the most, has only one with him. I make out a score moving yonder."

Creeping from rock to rock, they got close to the back of the hut where the window was, and Hiram Crayton, the Swaggerer, stole up and listened.

Jack was breathing heavily, and that was the only sound he could hear.

Stealing back to his companions, he whispered the good news to them.

"Alone," he said, "and sleeping. Two can watch, and one can work. Settler, you are handy with the knife."

"Handy when there's need," growled Black, "but you are so fond of keeping workmen. Suppose you do the little job yourself?"

"Bah!" said the Swaggerer, "you are afraid."

"When cowardice comes in," said Jim Black, laying a hand upon his arm, and looking steadfastly into his face, "you are not quite out of the hunt. I'll do the job for the pleasure of it."

He was kneeling behind a rock, and, drawing a big clasp-knife from his pocket, opened it.

"Feel the edge of that, master," he said, mockingly; "it's a good tool for your business, isn't it?"

"Go and do it," muttered the Swaggerer. "Dunmore and I will keep watch and give an alarm if any of that lot move this way."

Jim Black put the knife in his teeth, and lying down on his stomach, crept along as silently as a snake.

"He's not new to that part of his work," at any rate," said Dunmore, with a grin.

"Be quiet, can't you?" said the Swaggerer, savagely, "we are not playing pranks at a fair."

Black had now reached the hut, and was lost in the shadow of it.

To get into the hut, he must work his way round to the front, and into the moonlight again.

"If he can reach the door, he is safe," said the Swaggerer. "What on earth are those fellows doing?"

"Dancing a jig, it seems to me," muttered Dunmore. "Fib me all over, if I can make 'em out!"

"There's Settler," said the Swaggerer, "going round. Quiet, my lad! He's nearly there. Now, will he bungle it?"

"What on earth is that?" Dunmore cried, leaping up.

A sudden flash of light, and a great flame was roaring in the air. A shout from the hut where Jack was lying, the banging of a door, and Jim Black came tearing round the corner.

"Run for your lives!" he gasped, as he joined his astounded companions. "That big brute that floored you, Swaggerer, is with the boy."

At that moment Jacob Sturmby appeared, with a huge club in his hand, and the flames rising higher, made the beach almost as light as day.

The three villains stood revealed.

Jacob Sturmby, and at least a dozen of his men, saw them at the same time, and, with a cry of fury, bore down upon them.

The trio ran for their lives, and they ran well.

Outpacing their pursuers, they reached the wood, and plunging into its dark depths, were lost to view.

If hard words or threats could blight or kill, the trio of rascals would have ended their career that night.

But they escaped, and the honest settlers returned to the hut, there in turn to keep watch and ward over Jack until the daylight came.

He slept soundly, and knew nothing of this attempt until many days afterwards, when he had regained his strength.

It was slow work, for he had suffered sorely, and these rugged men had not the manifold appliances of civilisation to help them.

But they did their best, and little by little he regained the colour of his cheeks, and the strength and activity he had known before.

Nay, his strength was increased. It seemed as if Nature, deigning to help him, had developed his muscles, and strengthened his sinews with wondrous rapidity.

He landed on that coast a youth, on the brink of death, and came back from the dark gulf in everything but years—a man.

To all around him he was gentle and soft-spoken, but under his quietude there lay an earnestness that boded ill for the men who had wronged him and his so foully.

Between him and Jacob Sturmby, a strong tie had been formed. In the eyes of the settler, the handsome youth was something to admire, reverence, and respect. He was ready to be his faithful follower—to go with him wherever he wished.

But this subject was not broached between them until one night, when Jack had been two months at the lonely settlement, and he and Jacob were walking on the shore.

The men were busy packing hides for a ship expected in a week or so, and they were alone.

Jack had been very serious and thoughtful all day, and Jacob had been wondering what was in his mind. He had his fears, and they were now realised.

"How shall I ever repay you all for your kindness?" asked Jack.

"We ask for no payment," replied Jacob; "and if we did, do not the many things we have had from the 'Albatross' more than reward us?"

"It was not all I had to give," said Jack, with tears in his eyes. "There is more that is mine by right, and I take it; not for selfish use—no."

"My dear lad, I believe it—I know it."

"The time has come for me to leave you," continued Jack, "and I would part from you, and walk from here barefoot and penniless, if you would accept all I have."

"We will not take it."

"To my father you gave an honoured grave—to me a new life," said Jack.

"Money is no fitting reward for either. Oh, Jacob Sturmby, honest Jacob! how shall I part from you?"

He held out his hands. The bronzed and bearded settler took them in his. Thus they stood for awhile.

"Dear lad," said Jacob, breaking silence, "why should we part?"

"I am sad and lonely," said Jack. "All that was dear to me is gone, and I would gladly, for myself, linger here, and pass a quiet life, but duty calls me away."

"You think it your duty to follow those villains?"

"Jacob—honest Jacob—what would you think, if you were in my place?"

"Dear lad," said the honest fellow, "were I in your place, I should never rest until I found them."

"And then?"

"I'd hand them over to the law, and see them punished for their crimes."

Jack smiled sadly, and shook his head.

"I will trust to no country, no law, and to no man, to punish those treblydyed scoundrels. Alone I will bring them to book."

"A job that a man might shrink from," said Jacob.

"I shall not quail. I may fail, it is true, but so far as in me lies the strength, I will go on and avenge the cruel fate of my father, brother, and the honest men who fell on board the 'Albatross.' I have thought it well over, and I must. To-morrow we must part."

"And which way will you go, my lad?"

Jacob looked at the forest, and hesitated.

"I will wander here and there until I find a clue, then I will follow it," he said.

"You are young, and know nothing of wood life," said Jacob Sturmby.

"You would perish in the forest."

"I will risk it," said Jack.

"You shall not, dear lad," said the honest fellow, his face aglow with enthusiasm. "No, if you die it shall not be alone. I will go with you."

"You!" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes. I could not rest here after you were gone, so I will be your servant, if you will keep me."

"Never a servant, and always a friend."

"It makes my heart warm to hear you," said Jacob Sturmby; "will you have me?"

"On one condition."

"And that is, dear lad?"

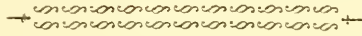
"That you never attempt to do any of the work which I consider my own. Help I may ask of you, but my seven foes must meet with justice from my hand alone."

"As you will," replied Sturmby, "and yet how gladly would I help you."

"What will your comrades say?" asked Jack.

"They will envy me, nothing more," was the reply.

"So be it, then," said Jack. "More than welcome as a friend, I accept your noble, generous offer to share my sad lot. We will start at dawn."



CHAPTER X.

THE NEW GOLD-FIELD—AN UNLUCKY CLAIM—LUCK AT LAST, AND A BID FOR IT—THE STRANGE LETTER.

THE Findwell Gold-field was in full activity, and eager men were washing the soil from early morn till dewy eve, with the varying luck that attends the digger's lot.

Some hundreds of men of various nationalities, but mainly English and American, had gathered together as if by magic, as soon as it was known that gold could be found in that sterile spot.

It lay about a hundred and twenty miles north of the spot where the "Albatross" had come aground, and as the vulture goes by instinct straight to the carcase, so did the Swaggerer and his followers find their way to the diggings.

They were in time to seize upon a plot of land that promised well, but the spot they had chosen proved to be a barren one in the midst of plenty.

They dug, and sifted, and washed, and could only get just sufficient to purchase the bare necessities of life at the eating and drinking saloon started by an enterprising Yankee named Bilberry Tucker.

He was a pushing man in his way, but scorned the labour of the field.

He knew there was a better way to get rich than by digging and washing the earth and sand.

"They shall find the metal," he said, "and I'll take care of it for them."

It was not the first time that he had "opened shop" at a diggings, and he knew the class of men he had to deal with.

In every pocket he had a revolver, a bowie-knife down his back, another in his belt, and two more in his boots.

"You may be standing upright," he would say, "or bending, or lying down when they come at you, and it is as well to be ready for 'em. Many a man's lost his life through having to feel about for

his weeping. I don't waste time that way."

They were a rough lot, truly, and when they gathered round the bar at night to brag of their good fortune, or curse their ill-luck, the assemblage was not that class which the Peace Society would admire.

Brawling was common, and bloodshed a thing of everyday occurrence.

Some were wounded only, and, if they were strong men, soon got better, but during the two months that the field had been worked, at least a score had died, and lay rudely buried by a clump of bushes at the river-side.

A life of excitement, feverish and dangerous, but it suited the majority of the gathering. "A short life and a merry one" was their motto, and some were short without being particularly merry.

It was a hot day at noon, and Bilberry Tucker, leaning easily in the bar, trifled with a toothpick as he watched the diggers at work.

His shanty was without customers, few men were mad enough to drink away the daylight. They gave up the night to that pastime.

"Another shout," said Bilberry; "more luck to the finder, and better luck to me. Here's the health of the digger, whoever he is."

He filled a small glass with raw spirits from a tap he kept for his own drinking, and tossed it off. As he put down the glass, a shadow darkened the entrance.

Looking up, he saw a tall man, with a heavy brown beard, and a sombrero hat pulled down over his eyes—a man he had never seen before.

"Good-day," said the newcomer.

"Good-day, stranger," replied Bilberry. "Want a drink?"

"Two," was the answer.

Bilberry filled two glasses, and from experience knew that one was meant for him. He nodded his head, tossed it off, as he had done the first, and pocketed the coin the stranger gave him.

"Come to dig?" he said.

"Perhaps," was the reply.

Then there was a pause.

"Rum lot here," said the stranger.

"No dancing-masters," Bilberry replied, "nor dukes, nor lords, nor parsons."

"Good luck, I believe?"

"Some has; it ain't all findings."

"I was thinking of buying an unlucky claim," said the stranger. "There is such a thing here, I suppose?"

"There's one yonder," said Bilberry Tucker, "just where that bit o' rock sticks up like a big egg, that ain't worth one ounce a day, and yet there are seven poor devils working it."

"Seven you say?" said the stranger, and his eyes glistened.

"That's the number," said Tucker.

"All came together, and keep mighty close about where they came from."

"That don't matter much, I reckon."

"Nothing to me."

And then there was another pause.

"I'm bent on buying a bad claim," said the stranger, "because it's the luck of some people to dig till they come to within an inch of the gold, and then lose heart. I'll buy this one if they'll part."

"They'll jump at an offer that will give them a couple of days' drink," said Bilberry Tucker.

"Good," replied the stranger. "I shall see them here to-night, perhaps."

"Sure to drop in—everybody comes."

"Then I'll just go back, and get my tools, and if they should come in before I return, just give 'em this note. It's asking them to hold off selling until they see me."

"You knew they had to sell, then?"

"I heard of it."

"But it's a fool's trick to ask them to hold off. They will double the price."

"But they won't get it," said the stranger. "Have another drink?"

"Don't mind if I do."

They had their drink, and with a nod of the head, parted. Bilberry Tucker, left alone, took up the letter, and looked at it curiously.

It was simply a piece of paper, folded and sealed, but folded in such a way that it could not be peered into. Tucker tried to get a glimpse of the contents, and failed.

"A rum go," he muttered. "We ain't a letter-writing lot. Word o' mouth and money down is all we look for. But I guess there's something in the wind, and something dangerous, too."

The address on the letter ran—

"To the Chief of the Seven Diggers of Findwell Field."

The storekeeper tucked it between two bottles on a shelf at the back, and resumed his watching attitude.

Familiar with the sights of the diggings, he could interpret every movement and every sound. By-and-by, about two hours later, there was a great shout from the neighbourhood of the rock that was shaped like an egg.

"The seven in luck at last," muttered Bilberry Tucker. "Our stranger will have to bid up for the claim."

His judgment was soon confirmed by one of the diggers, who came in hot and thirsty for a hurried drink.

"Heard the news?" he said.

"The seven in luck."

"Right. Tumbled on to a lot of dust, and they are all swearing because they haven't got a full day before them."

"They swear pretty well, however things may go," said Bilberry Tucker, coolly; "it's as natural to 'em as barking is to a dog."

The digger assented and retired. Shortly after other visitors began to drop in, and in due time evening came.

The last to appear in the shanty was the gang of seven. They had toiled up to the last moment, and came in exulting.

The Swaggerer had never been more boastful and arrogant in his demeanour, and, with the air of a baron of old, he handed some gold-dust to Bilberry Tucker.

"Weigh that," he said, "and give us something for it."

Tucker dropped it into a small pair of scales, weighed it carelessly, and called out—

"Two ounces. Three bottles of spirit and dinner for the lot. Will that do?"

"Hand over," said the Swaggerer, contemptuously; "it's near enough."

There were rough tables at the far

end, and at one of these the seven assembled. The diggers gathered round and asked them questions about the good luck they had found that day.

Taking up the cue of their leader, they all bragged.

They had come upon gold-dust lying so thick that the earth scarcely wanted washing. There were cartloads—tons of it.

"You will want the New York militia to escort you home with it," said one man, with a grin. "Why don't you send for 'em? It ain't far."

"I daresay we can take care of ourselves. I don't know that we are afraid of anybody here."

"Hullo, there!" cried Bilberry Tucker from the bar. "I forgot this. A party left it to-day, and asked me to be sure to give it to you."

He tossed the letter towards them, and it fell upon the table address uppermost.

"This can't be for us," the Swaggerer said; "we don't know anybody here."

"There is no other gang of seven working here," replied Tucker, "and I know it's for you, because it's about your claim."

"Is it?" said the Swaggerer. "Well, if anybody wants it they can't have it."

So saying, he took up the letter and opened it.

The moment his eye caught the contents the colour forsook his cheeks, and he trembled visibly.

Fortunately for him, a slight brawl at the other end of the bar drew all but his six companions away.

"What is it?" asked Jim Black. "You look as if you were an Irish tenant, and had got notice of eviction."

"Don't cut your stupid jokes," replied the Swaggerer, "but read it and pass it round."

CHAPTER XI.

A MESSAGE FROM THE AVENGER—A CHALLENGE NOT TO BE DENIED—DRAWING LOTS.

THE contents of that paper were as follows—

"To the dastard Hiram Crayton, and his six fellow-murderers,—The Avenger is on your trail, and ere another sun has risen and set will call for one of you. Choose among yourselves who shall be the first to pay the penalty of their crimes."

They passed it from one to the other, and the face of every man blanched in turn.

It came so suddenly upon them, taking them in the midst of their new-found joy. It was like a shot fired in the thick of a pleasure party.

"There is but one who could have written this," said Jim Black; "and why should we be afraid of a boy?"

"He bears a charmed life," said the Swaggerer, shuddering.

"There is no such thing," said Dunmore, doggedly. "The boy was lucky to get out of his first trouble, and he

takes advantage of our being afraid of him."

"Who's afraid?" asked the Swaggerer.

The men answered by the chattering of teeth, and a violent sneeze from Walker Dribbles, who showed signs of collapsing.

"He's going to work on a system, this Jack Boldheart," said Jim Black. "He's got notions of honour, and doesn't mean to take us unawares. He's a—"

"Hush, for your life! Here he is!" muttered the Swaggerer.

Jack had come in among the motley band at the bar like some vision of a more beautiful and nobler race than any there could boast of, his face set with determination, his eyes ablaze with anger.

Behind him came Jacob Sturmby, calm and easy, with a hand in each side-pocket of his coat, and in each hand a revolver.

Tucker recognised the stranger of the

afternoon, but Sturmby took no notice of him.

His eyes were upon these seven villains, closely watching their every movement.

"Sit still!" thundered Jack, as they attempted to rise, "and let no man among you seven attempt to touch his weapon, or I fire."

There was no mistaking his look and tone, and a dead silence fell upon the motley crowd.

They felt that they were about to look upon a scene of more than ordinary interest.

"I am here," continued Jack, speaking to all around him, "to avenge my father's death. He was foully murdered by those villains there. Will any of the seven deny it?"

They were silent, but there was a muttering among the crowd, and angry glances bestowed upon the Swaggerer and his followers.

"My brother, a boy of twelve," Jack continued, "they bound to a life-belt and cast him into the sea to perish inch by inch. The mate shared the same fate, and the seamen were foully murdered as they slept. Sit still, I say."

It was the Swaggerer who attempted to rise, with the object of making an attempt to escape; but the diggers formed a line across the shanty, and there was no passage for him.

"I have tracked these men," said Jack, "and I could secretly have slain them one by one. I scorn a dastard act like that. I give them a chance for their lives. I will fight them one by one, with any weapon they choose. One to-night, and the rest when it pleases me to call upon them."

"Bully for you, my boy," cried out one of the diggers. "We will see you through it."

And the rest cried—

"We will! we will!"

The seven were in a trap, and one was doomed. That one and all felt. But who was the victim to be?

"If there is a spark of real manhood in any of you," cried Jack, "let the possessor of it stand forth."

But no man moved.

"I protest against this sort of thing," said the Swaggerer, in a tone of wild protest. "Who knows this boy?—he is strange to us—he is mad."

"But I am sane," said Sturmby "he has told nothing but the truth."

"Choose a man from among you, and let him meet me outside," cried Jack.

"Aye, choose!" cried the diggers, "or we will swing the lot of you. Judge Lynch holds court here, you know."

"If one is chosen," said the Swaggerer, "and he proves victorious, what guarantee have we that we shall be allowed to go free?"

"I wish it to be understood that if I fall everything is ended," said Jack; "my mission will have been a failure, that is all."

"Draw lots, and have done with it," said Tucker; "you seven blackguards are stopping business. I'll cut seven bits of string of different lengths, and he who draws the shortest wins."

"We have no other choice but to obey," said Hiram Crayton; "you are ten to one against us."

The string was cut, and Bilberry Tucker rolled the pieces up in his hands, leaving only the ends out between his palms.

"Who first?" he said.

The Swaggerer stepped forward and drew one.

"That's not the shortest," Tucker said, and the leading scoundrel, with a sigh of relief, resumed his seat.

Jim Black followed, and was assured that he had escaped; then followed Magson, also favoured, and then Dunmore.

As he drew out his piece of string, the eyes of Bilberry Tucker twinkled.

The wretched man looked into his face and shuddered.

"I've got it," he said.

"It's a hundred to one on you," was the calm reply.

Dunmore was a strong, thick-set fellow, with a big head and the neck of a bull; one of those ruffians without any feeling or consideration for others, but mightily sensitive about himself.

With a face as pallid as marble, he groped to his seat like a blind man, and sat down.

The Pantaloon and Dribbles drew the two remaining ends, and they were longer than the one which had fallen to the lot of the ex-pugilist.

"You have only now to choose your weapon," said Jack.

"I want to know why it should be me more than anybody else," said Dunmore.

"Choose your weapon and fight," cried Jack, "or I'll shoot you as I would a cur."

"Or be hanged like a dog," said somebody in the corner.

"Well, I'll fight with the revolver," he said, rising. "I've got a chance, anyway."

And suddenly, before anyone could guess his purpose, he whipped out his revolver and fired.

The bullet sped over the heads of those present, pierced the thin wooden roof of the shanty, and whistled away in the darkness.

With a yell of execration, the digger's bore down upon him, and he would have been dragged out and lynched but for Jack, who intervened.

"Bring him out," he said, "but do

him no harm. Let the dog have a fair fight for his life."

They dragged Dunmore from the shanty, and a number of torches being obtained, the ground outside was speedily illuminated, and the men formed two lines.

All but his six companions in crime were there, and they had taken advantage of the confusion and fled.

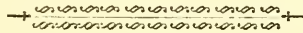
"Seven paces—no more," said Jack, and he measured that distance and wheeled round.

"Get up," he said to Dunmore, who lay cowering on the ground.

"I can't, and won't," was the reply. "I won't be shot like a wild beast."

"You deserve to be," cried Jack; "but we will have all fair. Will somebody help him to rise?"

Then Jacob Sturmby came out of the crowd, and lifting the trembling villain, put him on his feet.



CHAPTER XII.

THE FATE OF DUNMORE—FLIGHT—TWO SPECKS ON THE HORIZON.

"JACOB," said Jack, "take my handkerchief and count three. Then drop it as a signal to fire. Dunmore, are you ready?"

"I want time," said he, glaring about him. "I can't die like this, 'specially just as luck has come to us. Is there nobody to speak a good word for me?"

"Remember the 'Albatross,'" said Jack, sternly. "Jacob, we are losing time."

"One!" said Sturmby.

"I only want an hour," groaned Dunmore.

"Two!" said Sturmby.

"Give me a minute more—I—I—"

"Three!"

Then the handkerchief fell.

Dunmore had his weapon down, but Jack waited until he raised it, with a sudden desperate effort. Then both fired.

Quickly the spectators glanced from one to the other.

Jack stood erect, but Dunmore was staggering forward, and soon fell upon his face.

With one convulsive movement, he turned over and cried out, "I've got my due," and lay still.

"Is he dead?" asked Jack, standing up erect, and pale with emotion.

"Yes, he's gone," replied one of the men who had advanced to raise him.

"Enough. I have done with him," said Jack. "Jacob, let us go."

Jacob Sturmby came out of the crowd, and silently, side by side, they stole away until they were lost in the darkness.

The diggers watched them until they were out of view, then stared at each other for a few moments in utter amazement.

Bilberry Tucker broke the silence.

"Well, my hearties," he said, "I think we shall want a drink after that. We can bury this party by-and-by."

"I'd not like to be one of the six left," said a big man with a red beard. "That youngster means downright real business, he does."

"Will they stick to their claim?" asked another.

"They won't even stop to sell it,"

said Bilberry Tucker, "if I can read deadly fear in men's faces."

"It's cut and run, you think?" said Redbeard.

"I'll bet fifty drinks on it."

"Then we may as well raffle the claim," said Redbeard, "unless you think the youngster will take it."

They went back to the shanty, and drank to the young stranger who had given them an evening of excitement, and afterwards raffled the claim.

It fell to the lot of Redbeard.

"Luck's mine," he said.

"And being in luck," said Bilberry Tucker, "you can go and dig a hole for that chap outside."

"I'll do it at dawn," he answered, "and I'll give him an odd corner of his own land."

Then the coarse revelry of the evening was renewed, and the recent events, startling though they were, soon gave way to the great topic—the finding of gold.

In the morning, the new possessor of the claim buried Dunmore, and tried his new working.

But the yield was not satisfactory.

The pocket which the seven had fallen upon soon emptied, and once more it was unprofitable land.

"There is a curse upon it," he said, and, taking up his tools, went back to his old claim.

The six came back no more. They fled that night, and left the Findwell Field behind them for ever.

Terror-stricken, they fled in a northerly direction, and hurried on all night across the sterile plain.

"He's got a charmed life," they said, "and will bring us down one by one."

"Why not separate?" suggested Jim Black. "With half-a-dozen trails, he would be puzzled."

"Oh, don't do that," pleaded Walker Dribbles, with quite a fusilade of sneezing. "Oh, dear, I wish that I'd never been lured on board the 'Albatross.'"

"We were to make a fortune out of her," said Magson, with an oath. "Mr. Cocksure there had got all his plans laid so neatly."

"Growl away," said the Swaggerer, who was the Mr. Cocksure referred to;

"but just remember that it isn't all over yet. We may bring him down before long."

"So may the sun come down and roll like a hoop about the prairie," said Jim Black. "That boy's got a head like a young fox, and he will take his time to drop upon us when there's no getting away."

"There is one thing we might do," said the Swaggerer, gloomily.

"What's that?"

"Make our way to some port, and ship for another land."

"That's about the most sensible thing you've said for a month," said the Panther, Sam Silky. "Let's make for the sea, and take our chance."

"I'm pretty well tired out," grumbled the Pantaloon. "Ain't we going to rest?"

"We can lie down for half-an-hour," said the Swaggerer, "but we can't have a fire. Down with you, and I'll keep watch."

Gladly they threw themselves upon the ground, and Hiram Crayton paced with a cat-like step around them, his eyes and ears upon the stretch.

He had not admitted it to his companions, but he, too, believed that Jack bore a charmed life, and that their sole chance of safety lay in flight.

While in that country, he felt that it would be unsafe to leave his companions, but if ever they reached another land, he was determined to shake them off.

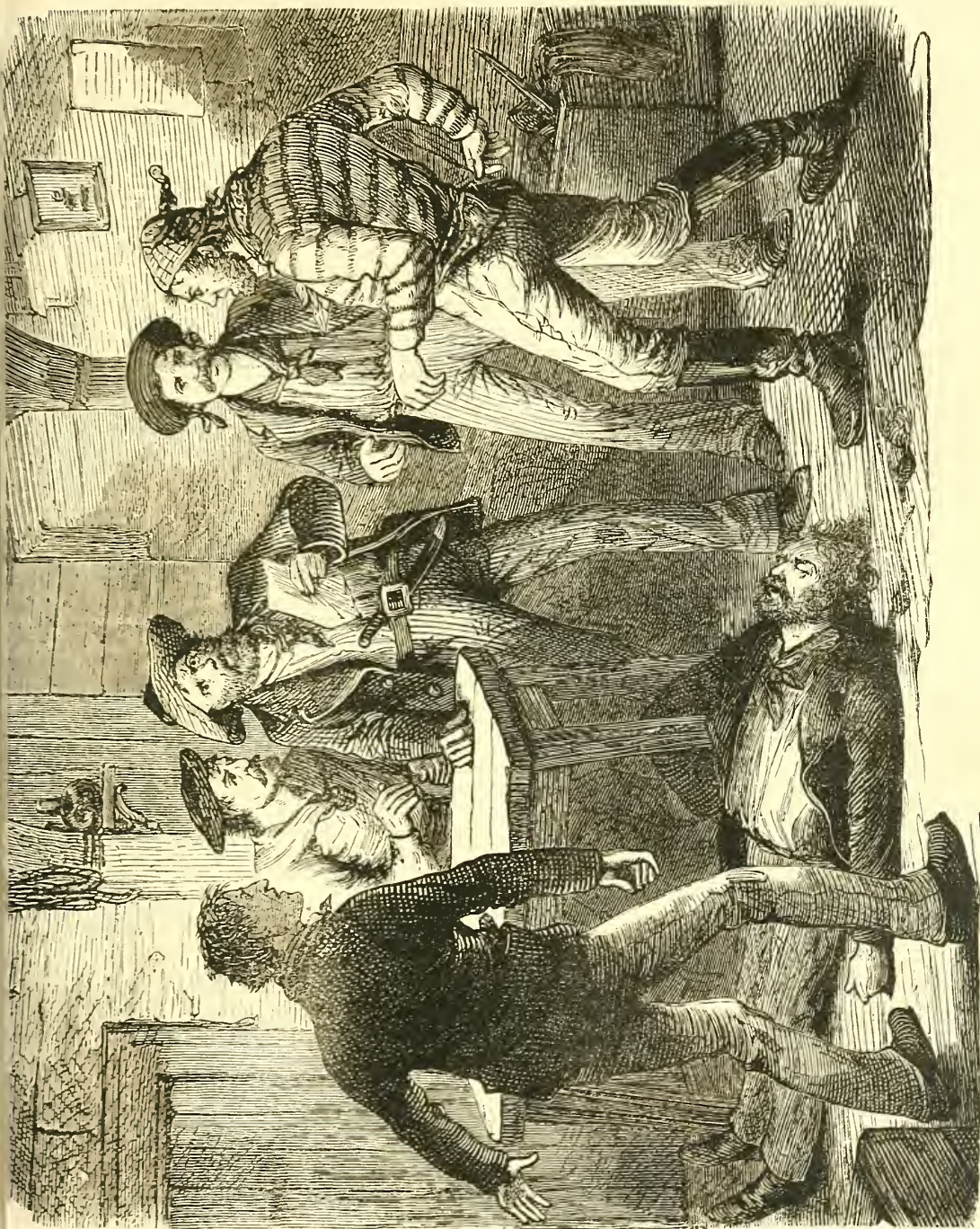
Disguised, and under another name, he might escape the fate he feared.

All was silent around him. No cry broke the stillness, but his imagination more than once created advancing footsteps to terrify him, and twice he was sure he saw two forms dimly outlined against the sky.

When he fancied the time he named was up, they arose and went forward, weary from broken sleep, and shivering with cold.

The Swaggerer could hear their mutterings, and he knew that he was the subject of their angry thoughts.

"They would kill me if they dared," he said to himself; "but they dare not. I alone among them can choose a route by the sun and stars."



...I NADIE BLACK THE SETTLER AS THE NEXT. LET HIM PREPARE FOR DEATH, READ THE SWAGGERER."

The Swaggerer understood navigation, and how to accept the heavens as a guide, while they were all ignorant men.

His tools, and once willing tools, but now in their secret hearts his foes.

And yet, if complete success had crowned their villainous work, they would have looked up to and admired him. It was not remorse but fear that governed their thoughts.

There was not one there that did not deserve the fate of Dunmore.

Nay, weighing their crime in the scales of equity, they deserved worse.

Mercy would have been thrown away on such wretches. They would have accepted it gladly, of course, but in security would have laughed at him who showed it.

The morning found them still upon their way—a great plain behind, and a misty horizon.

They had nothing to eat or drink, and the plain was barren.

Thirst parched their tongues, hunger pained their stomachs.

"How far have we to go?" asked Jim Black.

"Fifteen miles or so more, I reckon," replied the Swaggerer, "and then we come to the Washington Settlement."

"Fifteen miles!" snarled the Panther, and the rest groaned aloud.

"Those who don't like to do it," said the Swaggerer, "can stop here."

By-and-by—an hour later, perhaps—Jim Black looked back, and saw that the mist had risen.

There were two specks on the horizon.

"What are they?" he asked.

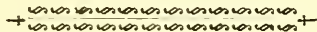
They all stood in a row, shading their eyes with their hands.

The specks were moving, something living was coming on their track.

"It can't be that accursed pair?" said the Swaggerer.

"But it is," cried Jim Black.

And they gazed into each other's faces with eyes that told of the terror that lay in their fast-beating hearts.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE TWO SPECKS ON THE HORIZON—IN AMBUSH—AN AWFUL MISTAKE.

THE cowardice of the six rogues was very extraordinary. It showed how the wrong-doer can be influenced by fear of the being he has wronged.

The Settler, however, speedily shook it off.

"We are six to two," he said; "why should we run away?"

"Do you reckon those fellows?" the Panther asked, pointing to the Pantaloon and the Sneezer.

"Reckon that the two are one," said the Settler, "and say that we are five."

The Swaggerer made a motion with his hand to imply that odds did not matter.

This young Jack is to be feared," he said; "he has a charmed life."

"A charmed grandmother!" growled the Settler; "if you were of my way of thinking, you would stand and kill him."

"Shall we play wolf and skulk?" suggested Sam Silky, the Panther.

"What do you mean?"

"See those bushes yonder? Suppose we hide there, and let fly into the pair as they come up?"

"Try your luck with Jack," said the Swaggerer, "and confound the man. We can settle him afterwards."

"Oh, dear, why can't we go on?" groaned the Sneezer; "it seems to me—atchew!—that—atchew!—it seems—"

"Oh, dry up," growled Jim Black, taking up a stone about the size of a cricket-ball, and hurling it at him.

The Sneezer stepped nimbly aside, and the stone caught the Pantaloon, who had turned round to look at the bushes, in the small of the back, and he went down as if he had been shot.

"Ever in the way, old man," said Magson the Lifter; "up we get again."

He laid hold of him by the trousers, and jerked him to his feet, getting an angry snarl for his pains.

No clown in a pantomime could have done it better, and no pantaloon have responded more characteristically.

Truly old Pharaoh Pipstone had an appropriate nickname.

And while this was going on, the specks had increased in size, and were coming steadily nearer.

"Well, what shall we do?" said the Swaggerer, "run or fight?"

"Pretend to run," replied the Settler, "and fight in reality. Let us get to the bushes smartly, run to them and drop down, and creep back to the border here. Then, as they come on, let fly at them."

"All aim at the lad," said the Swaggerer; "in his death, I tell you, lies our safety."

The others agreed, and they started off as if flying from pursuit, speedily reaching the clump of bushes, which were about shoulder-high.

At a given signal from the Swaggerer, they all dropped down.

"Now silence all, and follow quietly."

On their hands and knees they went, but ere they had got far, Walker Dribbles began to sneeze.

"Throttle the beggar, or send a knife into him!" growled the Swaggerer.

"Put him face downwards, and sit upon his head," suggested the Settler.

"He wants a bull-dog hanging to his nose," said the Panther.

"I can't help it," said Dribbles; "there never was a man yet who could stop a sneeze if it meant to come."

"It's my belief that you've a sneezing contract with Nature," the Swaggerer said, "and must knock off a certain lot in a given time. But drop the game now, or I'll stop it in a way that won't be agreeable."

Dribbles promised to do his best, but, as he truly said, he was not master of his nose. No man is. If it means to sneeze, it sneezes, and there's an end on't.

"Here's an open place they are likely to come through," said the Swaggerer; "three on each side, and all blaze away at once."

They lay down, the Pantaloon, Sneezer, and Jim Black on one side, the Swaggerer, the Panther, and the Lifter on the other.

"Confound it!" said the Swaggerer, "how thick these bushes are. It's like looking through a mist."

"Can you see them?" asked the Panther, eagerly.

"Just, and no more. 'I reckon they are about half-a-mile away.'"

"A-rashy-tchew!" went Dribbles, obliging them with a broken and half-smothered sneeze.

"If I were near you, I'd settle you," grunted the Swaggerer, pulling out a large knife.

"Atchew!"

"Do something to him; tie his head up, or knock it off his shoulders, will you, Settler?" said the Swaggerer.

"It wasn't me this time," cried Dribbles, in alarm; "it was the—the—ah, the—atishu!—Pantaloon."

"Suppose it was?" said the Pantaloon, with the grunt of a dog. "I can do it once in a way. If you want your head knocked off, I'll do it for you."

"You!" said Dribbles, scornfully. "I say—atchew!—I say—"

"Stop it!" said the Settler, giving him a kick in the ribs that was a settler, "you pair of wooden images!"

"They are coming near," muttered the Swaggerer. "Not a sound. Confound the bushes! I can only just see them. When I cry, 'Now, lads!' let fly, and take our chance."

A few minutes' breathless suspense followed, and then the footsteps of those approaching could be plainly heard.

Nearer and nearer they drew, and their voices, in subdued conversation, could be distinguished.

"Our ambush is not suspected," thought the Swaggerer, with exultation. "We have him now!"

Nearer and nearer.

A steady tramp—a heavy footfall, and a lighter one. The footsteps of a man and a youth, assuredly.

They came on, not dreaming of the foes in ambush, and, as the Swaggerer had hoped, selected the open part of the bushes to pass through.

They came on in a line with him.

"Now, lads, fire!" he shrieked, and six revolvers were let off simultaneously. The youth staggered, and fell forward on his face without a cry.

"Victory!" shouted the Swaggerer. "Now, up with your hands, Jacob Sturniby, or I'll shoot you down!"

He leapt up, revolver in hand, and the next moment staggered back.

The others had risen, too, and gathered amazed behind him.

It was not Jacob Sturmby, but a man of smaller mould. He had a small bundle on his back, and a digger's tools under his arm—evidently a digger prospecting.

He, too, was standing still, utterly amazed and taken aback. Twice he looked at the body of the youth, placed his hand in his belt, as if to draw forth a pistol, then looked again at the gang, and passed his hand across his brow.

And the youth—who was he?

About the same height as Jack, but not so sturdily built, and dressed differently.

He lay stretched out, poor fellow, on his face, and gave no sign.

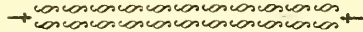
"Is he dead?" asked the Swaggerer, in a subdued tone.

The Settler stooped down, and slowly turned him over.

"Yes," he said, pointing to the lad's forehead, where there was the mark of a bullet, "he is dead."

And then the Swaggerer shook as if he had the ague, and a low groan burst from the lips of those behind him.

"It's a horrible mistake," moaned the Swaggerer, and the others shuddered and turned away from the murdered boy.



CHAPTER XIV.

FATHER AND SON—JACK PROVES A FRIEND TO THE SURVIVOR.

"DEAD!" said the man. "Did I hear that my Bill was dead?"

He was past the prime of life, and this boy was evidently the pride and joy of his declining years.

No more pitiful sound ever left human lips than the moan which followed the words he spoke.

"It can't be," he said, in a bewildered way. "Why, I was talking to him not a minute ago, and now he lies here. What's he done? Who are you devils that you should come and rob me of the one thing I loved? Who are you, I say?"

It was a terrible sight to look upon, this rough, honest fellow robbed in a moment of the light of his life.

No lightning from a summer sky of cloudless blue, striking the boy dead, could have come more unexpectedly.

It had amazed and stunned him.

"It's a mistake," said the Swaggerer, in a husky voice. "We thought he was somebody else."

"Then it isn't my boy, after all," said the digger, putting down his tools, and smiling. "I knew it couldn't be. Get up, Bill, and we'll move along."

He took the boy by the hand, and raised him up a little, but the eyes were glazed in death.

When he let go, the lad fell back upon the sward.

"Tired," said the digger, looking up vacantly into the Swaggerer's face.

"We've walked many a mile lately, and a sleep will do him good. Go away; my Bill mustn't be disturbed."

"The poor chap's gone clean daft," said the Settler, and, brute though he was, his eyes were dim with tears.

They were all deeply moved, for it seemed to one and all as if they had doubled and trebled the burden of crime upon their hearts.

"It's all the Swaggerer's fault," said the Panther. "He kept a lookout, and gave the word."

"Ah," said the Swaggerer, fiercely, "put it all upon me. It's an awful blunder, and we can't alter it."

"Why don't you keep quiet, then?" said the old man, in an angry whisper. "You'll wake my Bill. Go away."

"It's the best thing we can do," said the Settler. "Let us go on."

With heads bent and slouching footsteps, they went upon their way, and none dared to look back upon that old man sitting quietly by the dead body of his darling boy.

And that boy had been very dear to him.

Side by side they had trodden the plains, scaled the mountains, forded rivers, and penetrated forests.

The trapper's art and the digger's craft he had taught his boy, and both had a love for the wild wayward life of those who are called the pioneers of civilisation.

And now they were severed. The boy lay dead, and the old man, bereft of his wits, sat beside him "babbling like a child."

The man sat for many weary hours beside the boy.

The band of murderers disappeared in the distance, the sun passed the mid heavens, and went down westward; birds flew overhead, various animals galloped by.

The old man rarely moved, but sometimes his eyes would rest upon the face of the boy with a puzzled look, and he would murmur—

"He sleeps long. He's tired out, poor fellow."

Lightly the wind played with the boy's curly brown locks, and the beauty that comes to all in death was upon him.

Oh, pitiful sight!

Only a few hours ago so full of hope and life and strength, and now only a beautiful form of clay.

But woe to the murderers!

The image of that quiet face shall haunt them, one and all, until their turn comes.

In their waking hours, and in their dreams, the spirit of the boy thus rashly slain shall visit them.

The sun was near the horizon, and the shadows lay long upon the plain, when two wayfarers came upon the bitter scene.

Now, indeed, Jack and Jacob Sturmby had come upon the trail of their foes to find this record of their evil-doing by the way.

"Lord save us!" ejaculated Jacob Sturmby. "Look here!"

They paused, and as Jack's sad eyes rested upon the old man, he looked up and smiled.

"I thought you were dead," he said, "and then somebody said you were asleep, but now you've come back to me."

"What are you talking about?" asked Jacob Sturmby. "We've never seen you before."

"Hush!" interposed Jack. "Look at the poor fellow's eyes. Don't you see that he's lost his wits? Who is it lying dead beside him?"

"His son, I should say," said Jacob Sturmby, softly.

"The story is plain to me," said

Jack. "Foul play has robbed him of his son. Poor boy! look at him. But perhaps he is not dead."

"He is dead, Master Jack, sure enough."

"Then, if the old man will come, I'll lead him on a little way. You won't mind digging a grave for the poor fellow."

"I wish I could do him a kinder thing," replied Jacob. "Go forward, and I'll lay him to rest as tenderly as I'd put my own child—if I had one—to sleep."

Jack beckoned to the old man.

"Shall we go on?" he said.

"Aye, surely," was the cheery reply: "Old Ben's ready. We have had a long rest, and ought to keep on all right."

"We will walk slowly at first," said Jack, "as I think we might perhaps find gold hereabouts."

"You had always a keen eye," said old Ben, as we must henceforth call him; "and yet, with a puzzled look, 'your eyes seem to me to be changed. They used to be brown, and now they are blue: and—and you have grown taller.'"

"We all change with time," said Jack. "Poor old man! he thinks that I am his son."

"There's a width about the shoulders, too," said old Ben, with his hand pressed to his forehead, "that wasn't there when they told us to move on from the Findwell Field. What a rough lot they were! They could have given you and me a corner to rest in, and missed nothing."

The sun was down now, and the cold grey light of evening was in the sky.

The sad twilight threw a halo around all things on the plain, and it gave to the old man's face a weird, unearthly look.

"See here," he said, holding up his hand. "I'm puzzled—I mix up things. There were six of them that came out of the earth, and you lay down dead. No, it wasn't you—it was—"

He paused again, and looked about him as if in search of something. Jack took him by the arm, and led him on.

"We'll keep going," he said, "though it be slowly."

"Aye, yes, keep going," muttered Ben; "but where's the end on it?"

Jack led him slowly round in a circle, and so kept within easy distance until Jacob Sturmby came up and joined them. By that time night had come, and the heavens were full of stars.

"Your work is done?" said Jack, in an undertone.

"Aye, dear lad," replied Jacob, "I've laid him as deep as I could single-handed. He'll sleep in peace for many a day."

"Have you thought who killed him?"

"Some marauder, perhaps, who wanted to rob him."

"No; the old man talks about six of them. "Can you not guess now?"

"The all-fired villains?" said Jacob Sturmby, raising his hands. "So it was them."

"I can but think so."

"There is no fear o' losing the trail, dear lad. It's a broad track of blood they will leave behind them."

"Aye, they revel in it. Well," said Jack, "we cannot leave the old man to wander alone. Shall we take him with us?"

"It's like you, dear lad, to suggest it."

"You are willing?"

"Aye, heartily."

"Then let us get on."

He moved forward, and Jacob, taking old Ben by the arm, fell in behind.

Silently Jack walked on in front, his head slightly bent as he brooded over his wrongs, and those who followed him were silent, too.

So they went on through the darkness, straight on the trail of the murderers, like three avenging spirits, scarce breaking the quiet of the night with the sound of their footsteps.

Sometimes old Ben would utter a suppressed moan, and stop as if puzzled, but Jacob Sturmby would gently press

him onward, and he would go forward again without a word.

So the night passed, and when the light of the stars was paling before the first ray of dawn, they came to a wood, and sat down on its borders to rest.

"You had better sleep a while," he said to Sturmby.

"And you?" the other asked.

"I am going a little way, but will return to you," Jack replied.

He only went far enough to be out of sight of his companions, and throwing himself down on the turf, shed a few bitter tears.

"Oh, father! Oh, Willie!" was all he said, but his whole story was told in that cry of agony.

His wounds were not healed, could never be wholly healed, but the sight of poor Bill lying dead on the plain had reopened those wounds, so that as soon as he was alone they bled afresh.

He lay still, with his face upon his arm, and, but for a convulsive movement that now and then shook his whole frame, a looker-on might have deemed him dead.

But there was no mortal eye upon him.

Alone he lay, with the rays of the rising sun upon him, and renewed his vow never to abandon the task he had set himself until it was fulfilled.

After a time he arose, and went back to the others. They were lying close to the trunk of a tree, sleeping.

"It will not come to me now," Jack murmured, "but a hard day's toil may bring me some repose."

He began at once, and, gathering some wood, lighted a fire near, and set about preparing breakfast, as if he had no shadow on his young life, or aching of his weary heart.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GAMBLING SALOON—A LUCKY PLAYER—THE END OF HIS GOOD FORTUNE—
WARNED.

ST. LUCIA is a small seaport, and very few people on this side of the Atlantic trouble their heads about it, but our Yankee friends and the Mexican traders are very familiar with it.

The ships that come to the port are neither first-class nor numerous. They bring emigrants, explorers, and adventurers, and take away whatever there is to take.

Drinking-places and gambling-houses abound.

And there is no law to check the doings of either.

Around one of the gambling tables a motley crowd had assembled, and among them was the Swaggerer and his five followers, and all had some venture on.

The croupier, a sallow-faced Frenchman, knew his work, and called out the results of the game in the even monotonous tone of his class, paying out and raking in the money with a dexterity and correctness only to be acquired by a clear head and long practice.

"Red wins!" he cried, and the Swaggerer, who had backed the black, was heard to mutter bitter anathemas on the rosy colour.

All his companions had followed his lead but Magson the Lifter, and he, out of mere obstinacy, had gone in opposition to his fellows.

Seven times running had the red turned up, and the Lifter had quite a little pile of money in front of him.

"I'll back the red this time," said the Swaggerer.

"And I'll back the black," said Magson, with a laugh.

The other four held aloof once just to watch the result of the game.

Black won.

"Was there ever such luck?" asked the Swaggerer, appealing to his followers. "I'll go black now."

The Lifter, of course, went on the red, and red won.

"Now," he said, rising, "I feel that my spell of luck is over, and I'll give in."

"Ay, get away," growled the Swaggerer, "and I'll see what I can do without you. Where are you going?"

"To our diggings to pack up my few traps," the Lifter replied. "Don't forget that the 'Rattlesnake' sails with the ebb at one in the morning."

"We can leave here at twelve, and be on board in time," said the Swaggerer, "and I shall stick here until it is time to start."

The game was too fascinating for the others to leave, whether they played or simply looked on, and they remained behind.

The Lifter lounged to a table in the

middle of the room, helped himself to some drink, and, with the self-satisfied air of a winner, swaggered out.

With varying luck his companions played on until the Pantaloon and the Sneezer were cleaned out, and the rest at very low water-mark.

There was no clock in the room, but they knew it was time to go, and the noise of a bell ringing on board the "Rattlesnake," as a signal for the passengers to come on board, could be heard.

"My luck again," said the Swaggerer, as he picked up some small winnings. "I can't go wrong now, but I can't stop to play."

"Well, I think we must go," said the Settler. "I've just the balance of my passage-money—a plague on black and red, I say!"

They rose up, and, with melancholy faces, adjourned to the table as Magson the Lifter had done, and partook of drinks, which the liberal and enterprising owner of the den provided free.

Then, with gloomy faces, they sought their "diggings," that is, some rooms they had occupied during their three days' sojourn at St. Lucia.

They were in a house at the far end of the little town, occupied by an old Spaniard, with a smooth manner, and a pair of eyes that he might have borrowed from some imp of evil.

He was standing at the door smoking a cigarette as they came up, and gave them good evening.

"You must hasten, senores," he said; "your time is short."

"We have come for our few things," replied the Settler, "and for our pal—"

"Ah, what you call pal," said the Spaniard, "how will you take him? On your backs or in a bag? I have kept him for you. He is very still."

"What the everlasting fire and fury do you mean?" asked the Swaggerer.

The Spaniard drew hard at his cigarette, nearly burnt out, and laid it aside while he made another.

"I mean, senores," he said, as he swiftly rolled the paper and tobacco, "that if your friend is to go with you he must be carried. He cannot walk."

"Drunk?" said the Pantaloon.

"Aged and virtuous senor," said the Spaniard, with a leer of overwhelming,

not to say mocking politeness, "he is more than drunk—"

"What! Dead?"

If he had suddenly produced a brace of revolvers, and let fly into the thick of them, he could not have created a greater commotion—they fairly staggered back, and opened out as the words left his lips.

"Dead!" cried the Swaggerer.

"It is so, senor," was the calm reply.

"It was an affair of honour, and he has come off—what do you call it?—the best of the seconds."

"What have you to tell us?" cried the Settler, roughly. "Out with it, or it will be the worse for you! If our friend is killed, look to your own life."

"Senor," said the Spaniard, smoothly, "do not make things so much worse for yourself than they are. If I lift my voice, I have a hundred men who will come to me. I did not kill your friend, he died by the hand of a young friend, a countryman. Let me explain."

He flicked the ashes from his cigarette, and, after a whiff or two, condescended to relate all he had to tell.

"Your friend," he said, "came home, and went upstairs. Close on the heels of him I hear others, and thinking it is you, I do not wonder. By-and-by I hear voices calling for me. I go, and find three strangers in the room."

"Three!" said the Swaggerer.

"Three," repeated the Spaniard. "An old man with wild eyes, a man in his prime, and a youth who was more terrible than the others. It is him my eyes first rest on. Lastly, I look at your friend, who stood against the wall, white and shaking."

"I ask what I can do?" the Spaniard pursued, "and the youth say, 'I have a quarrel with this man, and we must fight. He has no second, no friend near, will you take that place?' Always happy to be of service at such times, I say yes."

"You are always ready to help in killing another," muttered the Swaggerer.

"With revolvers they fought," said the Spaniard, "each was to have six shots, and on the signal, fire as fast as possible. Your friend had lost his nerve—he fired wildly. There are five

of his bullets in the wall of my room. The young stranger waited until they had been fired, then he brought down his man with two shots. Ah, me! it was well done."

"Quite so," he added, with the action of firing a pistol; "one, two, and your friend stand, straight and stiff for a moment. I saw the light go out of his eyes before he fell upon his face. It was well done. It was workmanlike."

"And where is he?" the Swaggerer asked, shivering.

"I left him as he fell dead," said the Spaniard, "the strangers followed me shortly after."

"Come upstairs," said the Swaggerer, breathing hard, "and let us see whether this is true."

"Senores," said the Spaniard, drawing aside, "why should I lie? It matters not to me how you all live—or die."

With gloomy faces the five went upstairs, and entered an apartment they had used as a common sitting-room. There, lying on his face, they saw the form of their companion, who but a few hours before had exulted in his good fortune at the gaming-table.

They stood and looked upon him, and exchanged glances, shuddering. It was horrible to think that the avenger had come upon them so secretly and suddenly.

"Only this day," said the Panther, with his dark eyes roving restlessly about the room, "and we were congratulating ourselves on having escaped this avenging boy."

"We are all doomed men," said the Settler. "He has a charmed life, and will choose his time to put an end to us one by one."

"Who will be the next?" asked the Pantaloon.

"There is a paper pinned to his coat," said Dribbles, shaking all over. "Pe-erhaps tha-at will te-ell us some-um-thing."

The Panther stooped down, and unpinning the piece of paper referred to, passed it to the Swaggerer.

He bent down, so as to get the light of a small lamp burning on the table full upon it, and read it first to himself, then aloud—

"You cannot hide from me. You

shall not escape me. But from this time I will take no man's life among you without warning. He shall have time to prepare for death, and I name Black the Settler as the next I shall call to account. Let him prepare for death.—JACK THE AVENGER.”

A dead silence of fully a minute's duration followed the reading of this missive. Then one by one they drew

back from the man thus forewarned of his doom.

“I see,” he said, bitterly, “you think to give me the go-by now, but I tell you it won't do. Whether that paper lies or tells the truth, I mean for us all to stick together. Turn your backs on me, and I will blow your story about in such a manner that you will soon find a short shrift and a long rope. Now leave me if you dare!”

CHAPTER XVI.

JUST IN TIME—THE FIVE PASSENGERS OF THE “RATTLESNAKE”—THE CAPTAIN A TARTAR.

THE “Rattlesnake,” six hundred tons, was a vessel built for trading from New York to California.

The Pacific Railway, quite a recent structure, was, at the time we write of, only just conceived.

She was not fitted out for passengers, but she carried people who did not mind roughing it, and during the long voyage round the Cape they had ample opportunity for seeing the sterner side of life at sea.

The captain, whose name was Abraham Spanker, was a Yankee inside and out; he had no romance, no sentiment. The business and pleasure of his life was to accumulate dollars, and he succeeded pretty well.

The “Rattlesnake” was ready to go, the tide was on the ebb, and Abraham Spanker walked the deck, reviling six expected passengers in the choice terms of his class.

“I'll not lose a bit of the ebb for 'em,” he said, “so hoist away, you lean kine of Pharaoh.”

This choice compliment was bestowed upon the men at the capstan, who forthwith began to hoist the anchor, and they were halfway through their work when a boat came alongside.

“Rattlesnake, ahoy!” shouted somebody.

“The same, and blue rockets to you!” replied the captain.

“I've five men for you.”

“Then chuck 'em aboard, for I've no time to h'ist 'em up.”

With the aid of a rope, the five

men addressed clambered on board, and were received with a verbal display of fireworks both startling and original from the captain.

When he paused for breath, the foremost of the five, the Swaggerer, offered an apology.

“We've been detained,” he said, “and had some trouble in getting a boat.”

“There ought to be six of you,” the captain snarled; “where's t'other?”

“He got into a row, and was shot,” replied the Swaggerer, hesitatingly.

“That don't matter to me,” said Abraham Spanker, going off again into explosives, “he took his berth, and it must be paid for.”

“You don't expect us to pay for a dead man?”

“Yes, I do. He's no right to get shot, and rob me. I've to live, I have, and I've a large family to keep, so you pay for him, or overboard you go.”

“Very well,” said the Swaggerer, sullenly, “I'll pay. We are the only passengers on board, I believe?”

“The only passengers,” replied the captain, “and as I'm short-handed, I'll trouble you now and then to keep my boat straight. Port your helm, you canvas-backed dancing-master!”

The man at the helm, who wore a canvas suit, and looked as if he had never danced in his life, obeyed, and the “Rattlesnake,” paying off before the wind, stood out to sea.

Sleeping berths in a deck-cabin forward, of limited size, had been

apportioned to the passengers, and thither they adjourned.

A small swinging-lamp from the roof gave them sufficient light to see that they were alone, and the Swaggerer bade the Pantaloon close the door.

"Well, lads," said he, "what do you think of our captain?"

"He rides high," said the Settler.

"So he does," said the Swaggerer; "but men have ridden higher, and have been brought down. He has an odd and end crew of ten."

"Ah, yes," said the Panther, "of ten."

"We are bound for New York," continued the Swaggerer, "but we may not get there. Wait till we have rounded the Cape, and I'll tell you what I mean."

"The old game?" said the Settler, in a whisper.

The Swaggerer nodded.

At the same moment Dribbles sneezed.

"Oh, dear me," he said, "must we go a murdering again?"

"I'll begin at once," said the Swaggerer, "if you don't keep that blabbing shop of yours shut. Come over here, and lie quiet."

He spoke as if to a dog, and Dribbles obeyed him like a dog, and lay down behind the Swaggerer.

"It's early to speak, I know," said the leading villain; "but it will take time to think over. What one don't hit upon another may. We must not go as far as New York."

"No," said the Settler.

"And I think the Brazils will be far enough. What say you, lads?"

"Far enough," they echoed.

"And— Quiet there, somebody's coming."

The door of the cabin was kicked open, and Abraham Spanker came in.

He had a revolver in each hand, and close behind him were three men.

"Don't move, any of you," he said; "but sit with your hands spread out. We are just going to overhaul your traps."

"What for?" asked the Swaggerer.

"Because I'm nervous about fire-arms," replied the captain, with a grin. "Go to work, you drum-backed loafers. See what they have, and hand it over."

"But I'm not going to stand this," said Jim Black.

"Oh, yes, you are," replied Abraham Spanker. "Keep quiet, or I'll lull you to sleep with an ounce of lead."

There was no help for it. They had to submit.

All their arms, even their knives, were taken away from them, and they were left as helpless as five wasps deprived of their stings.

"You see," said Abraham Spanker, "I'm a man of peace, and things generally are peaceable when the weapons are all on one side. You've only got to do as you're told, and keep a civil tongue in your heads, and by the time we reach New York we shall be so fond of each other that we shall shed buckets of tears. It's time you turned in. Put out your lamp, and go to sleep."

He went out, his face all on the grin, his pockets stuffed with the appropriated weapons.

The door closed, and the five rascals exchanged glances of dismay.

"I must say this is a nice ship," said the Pantaloon. "This sort of thing is like taking away a man's living."

"We've been blown upon," snarled the Panther. "It's that young Jack. Ah, if I'd only finished him at the first go off!"

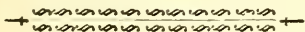
"Finish him now," muttered the Swaggerer.

"The chance was lost," the Settler said, "and there's an end of it."

"But there's one comfort," said Dribbles, "and that is, we are free of that young demon for a good two months. I suppose I may go to bed?"

"You may go to Hechabo," said the Swaggerer, "and stop there till I send for you. Beggar it! who would ever have thought of this?"

They got into their bunks, muttering and growling like a lot of wild beasts, and in a short time were fast asleep.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE "RATTLESNAKE" PROVES TO BE A BED OF THORNS—DRIBBLES HEARS SOMETHING NOT TO HIS ADVANTAGE.

THE rest they had was very short. Ere an hour had elapsed, the door of the cabin was thrust open, and a stentorian voice roared out—

"All hands to shorten sail!"

"Is that meant for us?" asked the Swaggerer, sitting up.

"It is meant for you all," said the speaker. "Up with you smart, or I'll give you a taste of rope that will stick to you for a month."

"I suppose we must obey," muttered the Swaggerer, as he rolled out of his bunk, "but I reckoned on something different."

"Two months' easy life you talked of," said the Settler. "Send I may die, but any life is better than this."

"Even life in the pretty little place where the mill goes round," said the Panther.

"Now then, hurry up," exclaimed Abraham Spanker, from without, "or I'll put a few of you in irons."

They hurried outside, and found that there was a clear sky and a gentle breeze. No sign of a storm or of one approaching.

"Did you say shorten sail?" asked the Swaggerer.

"I did," replied Abraham Spanker. "The sails are my own. I'm master of the 'Rattlesnake,' and I can shorten sail if I like, I suppose?"

"Anyhow," said the Swaggerer, "you might put your crew to do it."

"What's this—mutiny?" Spanker cried. "I'll not have that. Up you go, and the first man among you who hangs fire I'll make bacon of him."

He drew his revolver, and they, seeing he was in earnest, ran up the mainmast and shortened sail.

Barely had they done so, when Spanker bade them shake it out again, "and be hanged to them."

They obeyed, and came down to the deck again, every man jack of them livid with rage.

"Now, you see," said the Yankee, "I'm a man to be obeyed. When I

open my blessed mouth it's to make people skip and run, and if they won't do either, I give them one of my patent pills. As a rule it's enough. Hallo! what are you doing?" he roared, as they were turning away.

"Going back," replied the Settler, sulkily.

"Were you, indeed?" said Spanker, sarcastically. "Then wait for the word. We don't sleep much of our time away aboard the 'Rattlesnake.' Hallo! there—Slocum Kerry, bring up your fiddle."

A shock-headed man of low stature responded. He was so short-necked as to lead people to imagine that he was humpbacked.

But he was straight enough, and evidently possessed of great strength.

"We make merry, we do, the first night aboard the 'Rattlesnake,'" said Abraham Spanker, "and so you cat-wampous cockloft backsliders will have the goodness to dance."

"Dance!" echoed the amazed Swaggerer and his companions.

"Yes, you are to dance," said Spanker, "as I'm very fond of it. I don't dance myself, but I do like to see other people a kicking their pipe-shanks about. Now, Slocum, give us something lively."

Slocum sat down on an upturned bucket, and, with a grin upon his face, struck into a hornpipe. Some men from aft gathered near, and looked on.

It was almost dark, and they could only be mistily seen, but their amusement was apparent.

"Now then," roared Spanker, "off you go. If you don't know a hornpipe, give us something else. We ain't particular, so long as it's dancing."

"I never danced in my life," said the Settler.

"Then it is time you began. Do as I tell you, or I'll put you all in irons, and hang you in the morning. I'm aboard the 'Rattlesnake,' and she's on the high seas, and there I only know of one law, and that's my own. Dance, you lazy rascals, dance."

"I suppose we had better do it," grumbled the Settler, and forthwith entered upon that terpsichorean performance known as the double-shuffle.

The Panther and the Swaggerer joined him, and the Pantaloon and Sneezzer hopped about like a pair of geese troubled with tender feet.

It was a ludicrous sight, and chuckles were heard among the spectators. Abraham Spanker, however, preserved his gravity, and looked on with the air of a connoisseur.

The better to see what was going on, he sent for a lantern, and held it aloft, so that the light fell upon the faces of the humiliated and furious dancers.

"That's right," he said, "go ahead, toe and heel, up and down. What merry grigs we be! Pile it on, Slocum, let 'em have it lively. By the spangled banner of my native country, this is rare fun.

"Don't flag," he roared, as the Pantaloon showed symptoms of giving in, "wake up, you year-old gee-gee. Bless your back and bones, if they want oiling, I'll oil 'em. Pass me a rope, there."

"I—I don't want it," gasped the Pantaloon, as he flung his wicked old limbs frantically about.

"Then it's t'other chap who does," said Spanker, as he made for Sneezzer, who forthwith broke out, and as the rope fell upon him obliged the company with a nasal accompaniment to Slocum's fiddle.

At last, when they really could dance no more, Abraham Spanker condescended to tell them that they might stop.

"And you can turn in again," he said, "but don't be surprised if I make you turn out again in a brace of shakes."

When they got into the cabin, the five cursed everything aboard the "Rattlesnake," and their fury was all the greater for having to be suppressed.

"What does it all mean?" asked Jim Black. "Who ever heard of such games?"

"The skipper's mad," the Pantaloon said.

"Not he," hissed the Panther, "he's been paid to worry us. Two months of this life! I'll not stand it. I'd sooner be brained with a capstan-bar and thrown overboard."

"Warily, warily," said the Swaggerer,

"we may have a turn yet. Bide your time; a man overboard to-day, another to-morrow, and we shall soon bring it to evens."

"Something must be done," said the Settler, clasping his head in impotent fury. "Would we had stopped ashore."

"That would have been certain death," said the Swaggerer; "here we've got a chance of escape, at least."

"Anyhow, turn in," said Dribbles, "and let us get what sleep we can."

They flung themselves down, and one by one sank to sleep, their minds filled with thoughts of murder and revenge.

The Swaggerer and his companions were allowed pretty good rest this time, and it was daylight when Spanker was heard calling for Dribbles, whom he called "that sneezing bundle of bad manhood."

Dribbles lost no time in obeying, and was absent for about half-an-hour.

When he came back he was pale, and had evidently something of importance to tell.

He closed the door, and held up his hand.

"What do you think?" he said, in a breathless voice.

"Nothing," said the Swaggerer, impatiently. "What's the row now? What have you been doing?"

"Helping the cook, and whilst I was running about," said Dribbles, "I heard a—voice in the captain's cabin."

"That's nothing," said the Settler, "if anybody was there he would be speaking, as a matter of course."

"But the voice was *his*," said Dribbles, shaking from head to foot.

"His?"

"Yes, the young demon's—Jack Boldheart's! Oh, we are all done for now," and he fell down on the deck, grovelling like a worm that had been trodden upon.

"Can this be true?" asked the Swaggerer, and all eyes were turned to Jim Black the Settler, the next appointed to die.

He was sitting up in his bunk, with his eyes fixed and staring, and a slight foam on his lips.

Already, like the culprit on the scaffold waiting for the fatal bolt to be drawn, he saw the grim shadow of Death!

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOUBTS AND FEARS—MYSTERIOUS CONDUCT OF ABRAHAM SPANKER—ANOTHER SUMMONED.

"It can't be true," said the Settler, with a groan. "You must have been mistaken."

"No, I was not," replied the Sneezer. "His voice ain't one we are likely to forget, and I'll tell you something more. That Sturmby chap is aboard, so is the father of the boy we shot. I've seen 'em."

Aghast at the news, the listeners stared. They had a faint hope that Dribbles might be drunk or dreaming, but he was neither.

"I've not only seen them, but spoken to 'em," he said.

"And what did they say?" asked the Panther.

"Nothing. They only looked at me as if they had never seen me before."

"It's all clear now," said the Swaggerer. "The captain of the ship is in their pay. He's going to give us a rough time of it."

"Before our end comes," groaned the Pantaloon.

"It don't matter much to you," said the Settler, "for if you are allowed to run, you can't live many years. Your time is almost up anyways."

"I don't know. Some people live to a great age."

"Which you won't do, so you can be easy. But it's hard for me to be cooped up here. I can't get away," said the Settler.

He finished with a despairing gesture, and lay back muttering to himself for a while. Suddenly he sat up again.

"If you are men," he said, "you will all stand by me. Let's end it with a fight. I'm ready. It's better to be knocked on the head in a general row than to be dragged out alone and shot like a dog."

"You talk bosh," snarled the Swaggerer. "What are we to fight with?"

"Anything we can lay our hands on. Come, let us go out and settle the business like men."

He rose up and moved towards the door, but none of them stirred. With

a contemptuous growl he threw himself down upon the floor.

"Curs all," he said, "every man of you!"

"It's all very well to talk in that way," said Dribbles; "but it doesn't follow that we shall be finished off if you are. After a time young Jack may melt, and forgive what's left of us."

"He melt!" said the Swaggerer. "Not if I remember aright his face when we left him on board the 'Albatross.' There was no relenting promised there. He will go through what he has begun to the bitter end."

"Unless we can get away," said the Panther.

"Just so, but we have to do it."

With all their fears in active play, they heard the call for breakfast, and went out fearing to see Jack upon the deck.

But he was not there, nor were Ben or Jacob Sturmby visible.

Abraham Spanker stood behind a tub of cocoa, ready to ladle it out. The crew gathered up, and he counted them over.

"All here," he said, and proceeded to fill up a number of tin pannikins. Lastly he filled a jug for himself.

"There's no humbug about the grub on board the 'Rattlesnake'; all fare alike. Kerry, where are the biscuits?"

"Here," said Kerry.

"Serve 'em out."

Kerry had not his fiddle, but he had the leer on his face still, and it seemed to be always there.

He went round with a basket of biscuits, and gave two to each, the captain included, and helped himself last.

"The same sauce does for all here," said Abraham Spanker, blowing the steam from his cocoa. "If the King of France came aboard the 'Rattlesnake,' he'd have to grub as I do."

"Aye, that he would," said Kerry, "and he'd have to obey your orders, too."

"Darn him, yes," said Spanker, lay-

ing one of his biscuits on the deck, and viciously sticking his knife into it. "I'm a man that must be obeyed, I am. Shiver my body if it isn't so. We all eat the same, and we all grub together on board the 'Rattlesnake,' we do."

"You were dreaming," said the Swaggerer, softly, to Dribbles. "The cub isn't here."

"He is," said Dribbles. "I heard his voice, and I saw t'other chaps."

"Your nerves are loose, and played a trick upon you. They are not here, I tell you."

"I'm a merry man, I am," continued Spanker. "I make free with people, and there's no tarnation lying or shifting about me. Just hearken, you five."

"We are listening," the Swaggerer said.

"Open your ears, then. I tell you five that when I took you aboard I got leave to do with you as I liked."

"And who gave you leave?" asked the Panther.

"Your master," said Spanker, leaning forward and looking straight into his face. "But he didn't say to me, 'Do this or do that'—not he. He knowed I worn't a man to take orders. I give 'em. Slocum Kerry, am I a liar or not?"

"You're a hanimated himage of truth," replied Kerry, grinning from ear to ear.

"That's my mate speaking," said Spanker, "and he's served under me ten years. He ought to know me. Wal, I speak the truth. I was told I could do what I liked with you five."

"It is a curious thing to say," said the Swaggerer, with an effort. "I don't know anybody who has any hold over us."

"No, of course you don't," Spanker said, with a sarcastic smile. "You are a dealer in milk and honey, you are. Now, listen: I was told to make your lives a burden to you, and to take my own way to do it. Now, am I a liar or not, Slocum Kerry?"

"You are as straight as a gun made by a man with a squirt," replied Kerry.

Apparently refreshed and supported by this assertion, Spanker went on—

"So it comes to this—that I, being a man given to taking my own way, I can do as I like with you, and, as you are

living men, if you give me the least of trouble, I'll make you play Tom Titbit's game of hop and howl. I can do it, Slocum—can't I?"

"If any man can," replied Kerry.

"So now you've breakfasted, up and swab the decks, you five bits of pig-timber, and don't leave a speck on the 'Rattlesnake,' for I'm a clean and tidy man, and must have a craft to match me."

The work set them the five performed, while the ordinary crew of the vessel lounged about and looked on, smoking and grinning.

And this work was done with a comparatively light heart.

For Abraham Spanker's manner and words led them to believe that Jack and his friends could not possibly be on board.

To Jim the Settler, the relief was inexpressible, and he sang at his work until Slocum Kerry dabbed a mop in his mouth, and asked him what he meant by making a howling-shop of the deck of the "Rattlesnake."

"Can't I sing?" asked the Settler.

"Only when you are asked," was the reply; "we'll ask you for a tune afore sundown."

The morning passed, and neither by sight nor sound was there anything in proof of Dribbles's assertion.

His companions were sure he was mistaken.

"Or perhaps you have lied," the Panther said to him, when the deck-cleaning was done, and they were resting.

"What should I lie for?" Dribbles asked.

"Because it's natural to you," was the answer. "You have to jump about your inside a long time for a bit of truth at any time, and lying comes handier."

"I haven't lied," said the Sneezer, gloomily; "but I may be going mad. I have had enough to turn any man's brain."

"You sneezed all your brains away before you'd done cutting your teeth," said the Pantaloon.

The Sneezer looked venomous, but said nothing. He had brains enough to know that fighting on board the "Rattlesnake" was work that would scarcely pay.

The day passed on slowly, and Abraham Spanker, strange to say, did not indulge in any of his little eccentricities. After mid-day he was, on the contrary, wonderfully subdued and quiet.

Two or three times he went down to his cabin, stayed there for a few minutes, and returned with a graver face.

The change was mysterious and puzzling.

Slocum Kerry became grave, too, and laid aside his grin.

The ship was going on easily before a light wind, and he had nothing to do, but nevertheless he fidgeted about the ship, looking aloft, peering over the side, and staring ahead in a dreamy manner.

What did it all mean?

The Swaggerer noticed it, and comments passed between him and his brother rogues respecting it.

Was it a treacherous calm before the storm?

Could Abraham Spanker be indulging them with mock solemnity while he prepared some outrageously practical joke for the evening?

The Swaggerer tried to get some information out of Slocum Kerry.

"Are we to dance again to-night?" he asked.

"We don't expect people to dance at a funeral," was the unexpected reply.

"A funeral!" echoed the Swaggerer, but Slocum Kerry had no more to say, and passed on.

"Somebody must have been ill below, and died," said the Panther.

"Perhaps it's the captain's wife," the Sneezer suggested.

"The captain's grandmother," the Panther growled. "If you haven't a better idea than that, go and put your fiddle-head into a bag."

Towards evening land appeared in sight, and the Swaggerer saw that they must have been making for some promontory all day. He asked Slocum Kerry, and he said it was "Rogue's Cemetery."

This reply was more puzzling than anything the Swaggerer had heard yet.

More amazing still, the ship stood in until the lead touched six fathoms, and then the anchor was dropped and the sails furled.

And yet there was no sign of life upon the shore.

"I think we have a madman for a captain," said the Swaggerer.

But Abraham Spanker, graver than ever, did not appear to be mad. He ordered the cutter to be lowered, and two men got into it.

Then he beckoned to Jim Black the Settler, who was standing forward with a brooding face.

"Your turn now," he said.

"My turn!" said the Settler, with a startled face. "My turn!"

"Yes."

"What for? Who wants me?"

"Go ashore and see," said Spanker.

The Settler turned his weary eyes seaward, and seemed to be debating the consequences of a refusal to obey.

Suddenly two men, Slocum Kerry and another, obeying a signal from the captain, took him up, and despite his resistance, dropped him into the boat.

"Sit still," said the captain, covering him with a revolver, "or you'll lie still for ever."

The Settler cowered in the bow of the boat, and his terrified companions huddled together forward.

They instinctively guessed what was coming.

Then from below appeared Jack and his two followers.

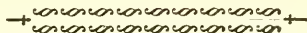
Without a word or a glance at the shivering forms, they walked across the deck, stepped over the side, and dropped into the boat.

"Give way," said Abraham Spanker, in a subdued voice.

The noise of oars followed, and a few moments later the Swaggerer saw the boat gliding swiftly towards the shore.

Jack sat in the stern like a statue, and old Ben and Jacob Sturmbly were guarding something that lay in the bow of the boat.

That something was Jim Black, the Settler.





"SPANKER BEGAN TO BELABOUR THE PAIR WITHOUT STINT OR MERCY."

CHAPTER XIX.

JACK AND THE SETTLER ASHORE—AN UNFORTUNATE SHOT—A RESPIRE.

If the comrades of the Settler viewed his departure with horror, what must have been the feelings of the wretched man himself!

He knew that his time was come, and he had no hope. Death was within measurable distance of him.

Like the others, he was imbued with a belief that Jack bore a charmed life. He had no hope of coming off victorious in the encounter that was pending.

As with all brutal natures cowardice lay at the root of his. He dared not face death. In a rough-and-tumble fight, he might, perhaps, have fought pretty well, but he had no pluck to carry him through a great ordeal.

He lay in the bow of the boat like a cowed wild beast, with his eyes roving from Jacob Sturmby and old Ben back with watchful gaze again to Jack, sitting in the stern quiet and immovable as the minister of fate.

If the Settler sought for pity there, he found it not.

Jack had a fixed purpose, and was not to be turned from it.

"It ain't fair," the Settler said, in a low, hoarse voice, "to drag a man ashore, and shoot him like a dog."

"You will be treated fairly," replied Jacob.

"You've no right to force me to it," said the Settler, "and I won't fight."

"We shall see," said Jacob.

"See here," said old Ben, holding up his hand, "there are five of you left, one for each finger. I shall check you off to-day."

He spoke calmly, and showed very little of the vacant mind. By degrees the truth had come back to him, and the old man knew what he had lost.

But he showed no violent grief, no passion. Like a cool spectator, he was there to look on, trusting in Jack to avenge the wrongs of both.

The boat grounded upon the shingly beach, and Jacob Sturmby sprang out.

"Come," he said, to the Settler, "get up and follow me."

"I'll not move," said the Settler,

between his teeth. "Shoot me here if you like."

"Carry him," Jack said.

The men of the "Rattlesnake" who came with the boat gave their aid, and the Settler, struggling fiercely, was lifted up and carried ashore.

They let go of him, and he threw himself down.

"Merely!" he said. "I am not fit to die."

"Remember the 'Albatross,'" said Jack.

"I was led into it," cried the Settler. "The Swaggerer was at the bottom of it all."

"A vain excuse," rejoined Jack. "You gave your help readily. You cur, will you get up?"

"No."

"Think not that I will be thwarted. You shall fight," cried Jack.

"I won't!"

Jack stepped back to the boat, and from under the seat brought out a dog-whip.

The Settler saw that it was a heavy one, and shivered.

In prison he had once tasted the lash, and had not forgotten it.

Jack raised the whip, and said—

"You see this. Will you get up? I shall beat you until you do."

The Settler, with a despairing face, rose into a sitting position.

"You've got the upper hand of me—all ways," he said. "I'll fight, but I'll choose my weapon—I've a right to that."

"You have no rights," said Jack, sternly, "but I'll not deny you the choice. What is it?"

"The knife," said the Settler, hoarsely. "Let us have it out with bowies."

"No," said Jacob Sturmby.

Jack turned to him with a questioning look, and he went on—

"The knife isn't fair. He could break through your guard, Master Jack, by sheer force."

"Let him try it," replied Jack, calmly. "Give him what he asks."

Two of the seamen had bowies, and they passed them over. One was handed to the Settler, who opened it and tried the blade with his thumb.

"This isn't sharp enough," he said.

"Try this," said Jack, giving him the other.

He took hold of it, and immediately with a yell raised both in the air, and plunged at the men of the "Rattlesnake," standing on the left side of him.

Taken by surprise, they stepped back, and one fell; with another yell he jumped through the gap thus made, and ran for his life.

"Stop!" cried Jack, bounding after him.

He did not answer, but, stimulated by fear, made off at a tremendous pace.

Jack, swift as a deer, was the only one who could keep up with him.

"I don't want to shoot you," he said, "unless in fair fight. Stop, you cur!"

But the Settler ran on, making for the mainland.

The promontory on which they had landed was very narrow at the end, but it widened rapidly, and the ground became broken. Huge boulders and stones lay thickly strewn about, and soon impeded the progress of pursuer and pursued.

The Settler bounded from one piece of rock to another, but ere long slipped and fell. In a moment Jack was upon him.

"Drop those knives," he said, presenting his revolver.

"I won't," said the Settler, with an oath; "shoot if you like."

He struggled to his feet, and Jack, feeling that any further delay was useless, took aim and fired.

With an awful shriek the Settler dropped the weapon, and rolled upon the rock; the bullet had shattered his hand.

By this time the others had come up, and he was surrounded.

"Take away that other bowie," said Jack.

This was done, and he lay groaning, disarmed and helpless.

"What now?" asked Jacob Sturmby.

Jack stood for a minute silent, with folded arms and knitted brow.

"I cannot fight him now," he said; "he must go."

"Better hang him out of the way," suggested Sturmby.

"No," replied Jack; "we will leave him here, and he shall have a chance for his life. Hark you, Black!"

The Settler glanced at him and groaned. He held up his shattered hand as if to plead for him.

"Will you take your life as it is?" asked Jack.

"Yes—yes," was the eager answer.

"Remember that we leave you in a barren spot, many miles from human beings. It is scarcely possible for you to reach any settlement alive."

"I don't care," said the Settler. "Give me my life, and I'll be thankful for it."

"Thankful?"

"Aye, thankful," said the Settler. "I'll be your servant, your slave, if you will only have mercy upon me."

"I'll not have anything to do with you," said Jack. "By an accident your life has been spared. I meant to kill you. Enough—you are free. But never cross my path again; and, above all, keep from old associates."

"Don't let him go," interposed Jacob Sturmby. "He is not the sort to make a good man out of."

"I cannot kill him now," said Jack.

"Don't forget that he's forfeited his life according to law."

"Granted," said Jack, as he turned away; "but I cannot turn aside from the line I have chosen. I will not fight a wounded man."

"Evil will come of it," urged Sturmby, "depend upon it."

"Well, if it does we must meet it."

Jack led the way back to the boat, and the others followed. He had, as he said, chosen a path to take, and he would not depart from it.

For the time Jim Black the Settler was free, and there was an ominous glint in his eyes as he looked after his retreating foes.

"He isn't charmed," he said. "He's no more certain than other people; and if I live and get out of this, I'll laugh at him in the future."

Then, tearing off his handkerchief, he bound it tightly round his wounded hand, and turned his face inland.

CHAPTER XX.

SURMISES ABOUT THE SETTLER'S FATE—A ROW ON BOARD—SPANKER COMES IN AT THE FINISH.

WHAT was the fate of the Settler?

That was the question that exercised the minds of his four friends left on board the "Rattlesnake."

The events on shore were not quite clear to them, the broken rocks on the promontory having hidden the final act of the little drama.

Jack returned on board, the anchor was hoisted, and the "Rattlesnake" once more turned her form seaward.

And nobody said a word to the four of what had happened on shore.

"But where's the need?" groaned the Sneezer. "Of course the Settler's dead. Oh—atchew—atchew—atchew! Who'll be the next, I wonder?"

"You, I hope," said the Panther, "if only to stop that confounded sneezing."

"He seems to be picking off the strongest first," remarked the Pantaloon. "Dunmore and Magson were strong as bullocks, and I should think that the Settler could wrestle with most men. Confound the cub! He's as bad as the old lion to deal with."

"We must do something," said the Swaggerer, with his bullying air. "Why don't you fellows choose your time, and go at him in a body? He's only a boy."

"Ah, that's it," sneered the Panther, "why don't we go at him in a body? Because he's too much for us in cunning, he overmatches us every way."

They were in their bunks, the only place where they felt at all safe to talk, and the lamp was swinging overhead. Apparently they were alone, but suddenly, without any warning, Jack was in their midst.

No spectre could have come more mysteriously upon them.

Frozen with terror, these four men lay still, staring at the boy whom they had just cause to dread. Speak they could not.

He went round from bunk to bunk, until he came to that of the Panther. There he paused and looked at its occupant with eyes full of meaning.

"You are next on the list," he said, in a cold hard tone of voice. "I put my seal upon you."

With his forefinger he touched the Panther on the forehead, and turned away. At the same moment the lamp was extinguished, and they were left in darkness.

Like a spectre Jack had come upon them, and like a phantom he had vanished from their sight.

A cold perspiration broke out upon their faces and bodies, and the very blood in their veins seemed to run cold, while their hearts almost ceased to beat in horror and despair.

In those few moments appeared to be concentrated all the agonies of a lifetime; and in their ears still rang the words, "I put my seal upon you."

Only the chattering of the teeth of the Pantaloon and Sneezer could be heard for a time. At last the Panther broke out into violent declamation.

And the Sneezer gave vent to his feelings in a fit of violent sneezing.

The Pantaloon struck him in the ribs, and hissed out fiercely—

"Be quiet. Hang you, be quiet! Your sneezes sound like pistol shots in my ears, and make me tremble so, I can't keep still."

"But—atchew!—atchew!"

"Curse you," cried the Swaggerer, "stop that!"

Meanwhile the rage of the Panther grew deeper and fiercer every moment, till he worked himself up into such a fit of desperation as to render his ravings almost unintelligible.

His fury, as expressed in words, was something awful, and it made all who heard him shudder. The Swaggerer ventured to remonstrate with him.

"It's no good going on in that violent way," he said; "I'd as soon hear such language from the lips of a dying man."

"And am I not dying? Am I not as good as dead?" cried the Panther. "And who has brought me to it but you, you sneaking hound!"

"I'm no sneak," said the Swaggerer. "And you lie!"

"You are," cried the Panther, leaping out of his bunk. "You have kept well out of mischief at present, and it is my belief you have squared matters with the cub."

"That's ridiculous. I wish I *could* square them."

"You've sold us," hissed the Panther. "Here, stop a moment. Let me get hold of you."

He had groped his way to the other's bunk, and laid hold of him in a grip of iron. The Swaggerer tried to wrench himself free.

"Hands off!" he cried. "Let go, I say. Curse you, take your hands off!"

"Yes, hands off when I've done with you," replied the Panther, as he dragged him out of his bunk, and up the ladder to the deck, where he flung himself upon the Swaggerer. "I'll not be the next—"

"Help, help!" cried the Swaggerer.

The Pantaloon and Sneezer took up the cry, while the two combatants rolled about in the darkness, locked in a fierce and deadly embrace.

The Panther had got a firm hold of the throat of the Swaggerer.

It would have gone hard with the latter but for the timely appearance of Spanker, who came up, with Kerry bearing a light, and followed by two or three seamen.

"Here, what's this?" he shouted; "you rascals fighting. All right, go it—I'll join you."

And with a stoutish stick he carried in his hand, he began to belabour the pair without stint or mercy.

This cooled their courage a bit, and, leaving hold, they rolled apart, and called for quarter.

"I'll give you quarter," cried Spanker. "I'll quarter you—I'll make mincemeat of both of you. Fighting on board the 'Rattlesnake'! High treason is nothing to it."

"It seems we can't do anything here," said Dribbles, who had not been fighting, and was not in any way called upon to make a remark.

"Dry up—evaporate, will you," said Abraham Spanker, as he dealt him a crack on the head that set him sneezing and snuffling for full ten minutes afterwards.

"I'm a man of peace," continued Spanker, "and I have a screaming objection to war. You hear me?"

The Panther was addressed, and with the blood streaming down one side of his head from a blow he had received, he sulkily nodded.

"Without order, no ship can keep afloat," Spanker went on, turning to the Swaggerer, "and order I make up my mind to have. If there is no other way of getting order than by knocking you into pumpkin sarse, I'll do it, for I'm a man of peace."

The Swaggerer did not answer him. He had been half choked, and had received some pretty stiff blows about the head and body, and was in no humour to argue with anyone.

"Peace," said Abraham Spanker, balancing his stick in his hand, "is a lovely thing. It's a bright picture wherever you find it, and I must have it aboard the 'Rattlesnake.'"

He looked around to see if anybody objected, but nobody ventured to do so, and turning to Slocum Kerry, he sought confirmation from him.

"Slocum, have I lied?"

"You can't lie," replied the ready Slocum.

"Do I love peace?"

"As a rule you regularly wallow in it," replied Slocum.

"True for you," said Spanker, approvingly, "and that being a known fact, I've no more to say."

He backed off, being a cautious man and trusting nobody, giving one last warning as he did so.

"I shall put a watch on you," he said, "and the first symptoms of a kick-up will bring me back again with a stouter stick. I shall lay on heavier each time. Is that so, Slocum?"

"You speak living truths," replied Slocum.

"If peace ain't got with my stoutest stick," said Spanker, "then I call up my bull-dog, who barks powder, and bites bullets, so you know what to expect, you four skunks in breeches, and so good-night."

His warning was effectual, and after he was gone, quietude reigned.

But none of the four slept again that night.

Each had his own thoughts to keep

him awake for hours, and it may be imagined that those thoughts were none of the liveliest.

The Panther was not devoid of a certain sort of courage, but events had cowed him.

By degrees the courage he once possessed had been sapped and undermined, and the dark future before him made him quake with fear.

"If I only knew when it was to be," he thought, "I might bear it."

And in that lay the sting.

He did not know when he might be called upon.

He was as helpless and in as hopeless a state as a prisoner under sentence of death, with no day or hour named for his execution.

So he brooded on through the hours of rest, and when the call was heard for him and his companions to turn out and begin the work of the day, he was still darkly brooding.

Slocum Kerry had charge of the deck with three of his men. They were all armed, as the remainder of the band of murderers knew, and kept a watch upon their every movement.

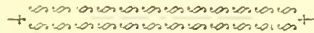
"They are too strong for us," thought the Swaggerer, as he began to scrub the deck. "There is no hope save in the mercy of Jack Boldheart. Will he go on to the end, and will he leave me to the last?"

He almost wished he had been chosen first, and put out of his misery; but life is very sweet, and he, like the majority of us, was in no hurry to lose it.

And hope, that never deserts us until the end has come, faintly shone before him.

He might succeed in escaping; Jack might die or relent. In short, he need not yet despair.

But even while he thought this, he ground his teeth in agony, and groaned aloud.



CHAPTER XXI.

ABRAHAM SPANKER DOES HIS BEST TO MAKE THINGS PLEASANT—WHERE IS JACK?

THE "Rattlesnake" kept upon her course for days, nothing of any great moment occurred, and neither Jack, nor Jacob Stumby, nor old Ben appeared on deck.

Their absence, however, gave no relief to the Swaggerer or the other three. The constant fear of his coming kept them on the rack, and the way they persistently kept their eyes upon the companion that led to the captain's cabin, interfered somewhat with their work.

It was a terrible life to live.

A grinding, wearing life, that sapped their courage, and reduced them, one and all, to the level of complete poltroons.

Abraham Spanker, without any kindly intentions, did his best to distract their minds from distressing thoughts.

He kept them going all day, and sometimes half through the night.

"The 'Rattlesnake,'" he said, "is a craft that must be looked to. If you shirk your work she shows her rattle and bites. Go ahead with that cleaning

there, you limp-limbed food for the hangman."

His fertility in finding new names for them was really very surprising. He was never at a loss, and occasionally he would be quite as handy with a bit of rope which he called his "Reminder."

"It wakes a man's memory up," he said. "If he's forgotten to do a job, give him the least taste, and he gets to work at once."

Neither the Pantaloon nor the Sneezer really required much "reminding," but they had a dose of it every day, and once, when the former ventured to remonstrate, he met with very prompt treatment.

"Slocum Kerry!" roared the captain.

"Here," answered Slocum, showing his head up from below.

"Put this old stick of mutiny into irons, and give him two days in the hold on biscuit and water."

In five minutes it was done, and the Pantaloon passed two days in the hold, with no other company but the rats,

with whose society the "Rattlesnake" appeared to be highly favoured.

When he was set free again there was a blanched look upon his face which could not be accounted for by so short a confinement. Dribbles the Sneezer asked him if he had been tortured.

"Yes," replied the Pantaloon, "tortured by being alone. Save me from it again."

"Time passed slow, eh?" Dribbles asked.

"Time was nothing," said the Pantaloon; "it was those who were on board the 'Albatross' that worried me. They were constantly afore me—gliding on and on, and yet never passing away."

"It was all fancy."

"So it may have been, but it wasn't the less awful."

"Why didn't you sleep away the time?"

"Sleep!" said the Pantaloon, with a haggard look. "I've not closed my eyes all the time. Dribbles, I am sixty years old, and I can't call to mind one year of my life that isn't shameful to think of."

"That's a poor look out."

"It is terrible. As a baby, of course I did nothing; but when a boy, I began bad. I was cruel to small, helpless things. I robbed and pilfered. I lied, and so I grew up to be what I am."

"There's a pair of us," said Dribbles, with a miserable shiver. "I was a beggarly little sneak when I was a kid. I pretended to be good, and I robbed my little sister's money-box. I did heaps of things that thinking of makes me shrink into my boots."

"If ever I get ashore, and clear away from him," said the Pantaloon, jerking his thumb towards the cabin, "I'll try and be a better man."

"I will be better," said the Sneezer; "I'll get work, and live honestly. No chap could be more sorry for his sins than I am."

And then they rolled their wicked eyes, and felt almost pious.

We shall see by-and-by how, when things appeared brighter, they kept this vow made in a time of trouble.

A week passed, and there was no sign of Jack or his attendants, and the amazement of his foes deepened.

They were so much upon the deck

and aloft that it seemed to be impossible for him to lie so close, without enduring something akin to imprisonment. But he did not appear.

The "Rattlesnake" was becalmed for four days, and nothing was seen of him, and nobody named him. Where could he be?

A hopeless thought flashed into the mind of the Swaggerer.

Was he ill?

He might be, even dying, and oh, joyous thought—perhaps dead!

The regular crew held no communication with the Swaggerer and his companions, and he knew it would be useless to ask for information from one of them, but he thought that Slocum was worth trying.

Accordingly he touched his cap to the mate, and asked if he might ask a question.

"Of course you may," replied Slocum, with a grin.

"Is anybody ill aboard?" enquired the Swaggerer.

"Ill!" exclaimed Slocum Kerry, indignantly; "what the deuce do you mean by that? The captain isn't the man to put up with people being ill. He soon takes that sort o' nonsense out of 'em."

"I don't mean the hands," said the Swaggerer, hesitatingly; "but—but—"

"But—but," said Slocum, mocking him. "Do you mean the feet?"

"I mean there are others aboard who might be ill. I—I mean no harm—"

"Oh, yes, you do," said Slocum coolly, interposing; "but you dursn't do it. If you could have your way, you'd flay us all alive and bile us to death, but you ain't got the pluck to try it on."

The Swaggerer bit his lip; but he was burning to know why Jack kept out of sight, and he put his question in a more definite form.

"I'm alluding to the passengers," he said.

"We haven't any," said Slocum.

"To the captain's friends, then."

"Oh, are they the people you are troubling your tender heart about? Well, you can make your mind easy. They are right enough."

"Not seeing them on deck," said the Swaggerer, "I got anxious."

"Perhaps if I were to mention it to

the captain," said Slocum, grinning all over his face, "he'd make arrangements to ease your mind."

"N—no, don't speak to him," stammered the Swaggerer. "It's of no consequence."

"Bless you, no, not in the least," said Slocum, sarcastically. "It don't matter a fig to you whether he's alive or dead. Shall I tell you something?"

"If you please."

"I wouldn't be in your place," said Slocum, impressively nodding his head, "for all the money that was ever carried over the sea. Shall I tell you something more?"

"Do as you please," said the Swaggerer, frowning.

"You'll be left to the last," Slocum said, "as a choice bit, and he'll make the most of you! Lor'! I wouldn't be in your boots if they made me King of France and Emperor of all the Rooshias."

He went away chuckling, and the Swaggerer, not in any way cheered by the interview, went on with the job he was engaged upon—burnishing the compass-box.

A few minutes later, when he saw the reflection of his face in the polished brass, it terrified him.

There was more than the natural elongation and distortion which rounded metal gives.

This was nothing; it was the stamp of horror upon his face that appalled him.

It was like some ghastly vision that comes with troubled sleep.

What was to be his fate?

He was to be saved till the last and treated as a choice morsel to appease the appetite of vengeance.

Was Slocum Kerry jesting? Had he taken upon himself to speak without authority, or had Jack really confided his purpose to him?

It irritated him to think that, after all, it was only a boy he was afraid of; but then there was so much that fought on the side of that boy.

First, he had right to support him.

And circumstances favoured him in the second place. All things seemed to play into his hands to the confusion of his enemies.

Even their own cowardice and terror helped him.

And then again, the Swaggerer had never forgotten the story Jack had told him on board the "Albatross."

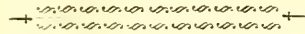
Had Captain Boldheart indeed been his friend to the end?

Was he ready and willing to help him if he could only have known whom he had on board?

The Swaggerer tried to shake off the belief that it was true, and he could not.

It clung to him, and showed him what chances of happiness he had lost, and what misery he had gained.

So he brooded and brooded, and the "Rattlesnake," with a fresh breeze, went upon her way, but still Jack made no sign, and was not seen or heard.



CHAPTER XXII.

HARD TIMES AGAIN—A SURPRISE—THE "RATTLESNAKE" DISAPPEARS.

ABRAHAM SPANKER of the "Rattlesnake" was at times a mirthful man, and he was blessed with the gift of extracting fun out of the most unpromising materials.

He also could see the humorous side of a thing when others were disposed to regard it with extreme gravity.

For instance, his treatment of the Swaggerer had twosides to it. He looked at one and the Swaggerer at the other.

"I'm a jockylar man," he said one morning when they were nearing the Cape, "and I must have my larf or bust. A chap of your humour allus does me good to look at."

The humour just then was that it was bitterly cold, and he had put the Swaggerer into the chains to heave the lead where the bottom of the sea could not be found with such appliances as the "Rattlesnake" had on board.

"My fingers are frozen," said the

Swaggerer, scowling heavily, "and there's nothing much to laugh at."

"Still, I sees the humour of it," said Spanker; "give 'em a rub, and get into the chains again."

"I shall pitch into the sea," growled the Swaggerer; "I can't hold on."

"But you must, my friend."

"I tell you," cried the Swaggerer, with a ferocious glare, "that you are going too far with me."

"Hey, snakes!" said Spanker, "mutiny again. Forward here, Kerry, and shove this brute in irons."

"No, don't do that, sir," said the Swaggerer, humbly; "I forgot myself. I beg your pardon."

"The next time you forget yourself," said Spanker, "I'll shove you into the hold, and keep you there till we arrive at New York. Get into the chains again."

With a groan, the Swaggerer complied. Life was a weary thing to him, and yet he clung to it, as we all do. It is seldom so bad as to make us really wish to go over the dark border.

The Panther, the Pantaloon, and the Sneezzer all got their share of hard work, and contributed liberally towards the entertainment Spanker felt so needful.

The Panther said little, but the groans of the Pantaloon, and the nasal expressions of Dribbles were daily heard all over the ship.

And all this time nothing was seen of Jack or his friends.

This was the hardest thing to bear.

The dread of his reappearance gave the four rascals no rest of mind during the waking hours.

At work their eyes were ever roaming towards the companion that led to the captain's cabin, expecting to see the familiar form rise up, and Jack's voice announce that the hour of another of the gang had come.

"Who will be the next to meet death?" was the thought that haunted them, one and all.

The "Rattlesnake" rounded the Cape, and still Jack did not show up.

Then a surmise, that had long been in the breast of the Swaggerer, became a conviction.

"He's not on board," he said.

One night, when it was his watch on

deck, he crept down to the captain's door, to listen to some talking going on there.

Slocum Kerry and Spanker were the only speakers.

"Where he's gone to, I can't say," Spanker was saying; "all I know is that he's paid me pretty well for what I've done up to the present."

"And you've got passage-money and work out of them chaps," said Kerry.

"Jes' so," replied Spanker, "and my larf into the bargain. Save me, what a mirthful job it is!"

"This young chap didn't say when you'd see him again?" asked Kerry.

"No; all he said was, 'I'll come to you again, some day, but when or where don't bother about. I have a task of death before me. Be sure I'll come.'"

"And so he will," said Kerry, with an oath. "He's a lad of his word."

The Swaggerer heard the foregoing.

The "Rattlesnake" was clear for a time of Jack, and he was in a measure a free man. With an evil smile on his face he returned on deck.

The Panther, who was also one of the watch, was leaning moodily over the bows, watching the moon just peeping above the horizon.

"Panther," he whispered, "don't move, but listen to me. He's gone!"

"Who?" exclaimed the Panther, starting. "Has he killed one of the others?"

"No; he's not here," said the Swaggerer. "All this time, while we have had the blue shakes on us, that young tiger has not been on board."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Listen."

He told the Panther what he had overheard, but his confederate did not share his exultation.

"What if he has gone?" he said. "He'll come again."

"Come again! Where?"

"Anywhere and everywhere. At some port we may touch at, or, at the latest, at New York."

"Well, we won't go to any of the ports or to New York."

"What will you do, then?"

"I'll tell you by-and-by; I can't talk here."

After the watch was over, they went to their bunks, and having first assured

himself that there were no listeners, the Swaggerer unfolded his scheme.

The Pantaloon and the Sneezer were in the relief watch, and did not share in the conference.

"Remember this," said the Swaggerer: "only we two in it. Let everything be done well, and take our time over it."

"Where will you try for land?"

"About Uruguay. I think we ought to be safe there."

"Right."

The next day they began their work.

The "Rattlesnake" carried four boats, and in three of these the Panther drilled holes in the off-side, covering up his work with tarpaulin.

One by one the oars were pitched overboard.

The boats swung in the davits as they had swung for many days, and nobody suspected the mischief that had been done—the tarpaulin covered all.

When their watch was in the night, the Swaggerer was down below.

The nights were quiet, the wind fair, and the captain seldom came on deck.

Slocum Kerry was supposed to have charge of the ship at the time, but he contented himself with coming up now and then, and seeing that her head was all right.

The demeanour of the Swaggerer and the Panther had of late been so abject that he suspected nothing.

But two people on board suspected much, and they were the Sneezer and the Pantaloon.

Said the Pantaloon to the Sneezer—

"There's something afloat between those two."

Said the Sneezer to the Pantaloon—

"There is. Let's keep an eye on them."

"We will."

And accordingly they did so, in that quiet way of theirs which some people would have called "sneaking."

Little by little they got at the root of what was going on, but they made no sign.

"We will see that they don't go without us," said the Pantaloon.

"We will," said the Sneezer.

One night, when it was as dark as it ever is on the ocean, the Swaggerer and the Panther, having all things complete,

determined upon carrying out their plot.

Their watch was the middle one, and all things favoured them.

Abraham Spanker had been very drunk that day, and Slocum Kerry had taken advantage of his relapse to imbibe too.

Both were below, and the ship was left to the man at the wheel and the men of the watch.

The Swaggerer and Panther drew forward, and conversed in whispers.

"We shall get no better chance," said the former; "I have quietly taken our bearings to-day, and I reckon we are not fifty miles from land."

"Even that is something," said the Panther.

"But the boat is provisioned; I put in a bag of biscuit last night. Remember that it is for life and liberty."

"All right—go ahead."

The Swaggerer slipped away, and glided below.

The Panther drew up to the gig, loosened the ropes, and lowered.

None of the rest of the watch heard a sound.

Everything had been done, every precaution taken. The pulleys were saturated with oil.

Having done this much, he stood by, waiting patiently. In about ten minutes the Swaggerer came gliding back.

Behind him were two shadowy figures, which neither he nor the Panther perceived.

"Is all clear?" the Swaggerer whispered.

"All right," replied the Panther; "drop in."

"Stop a minute," said a soft voice close behind him.

With a smothered oath, the Swaggerer swung round, and saw dimly the figure of Sneezer just behind him. Close by was another, which he made out to be the Pantaloon.

"Why ain't you fellows in your bunks?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Because we ain't such fools," replied the Sneezer; "we know your game."

"Yes, you've scuttled the ship, and you've got about ten minutes to get away. We are going with you."

"Oh, that's it, is it?"

"Pals hitherto and pals always."

"Just so. All right. We'll get into the boat, and you follow."

"No," said the Sneezer, with the courage of desperation, "we will go first, and you follow."

"And if we don't allow you?"

"Then we stop the game altogether."

"That's so," said the Pantaloon.

"In you go," muttered the Swaggerer. "Only don't let us have any blundering. No noise. There are lots of soft things to drop upon. The boat is just under you."

The Sneezer went over the side, and dropped into the boat. Excitement and the jerk of the fall brought on his old complaint.

"Atchew! atchew!" he gasped. "I beg your pardon, really. Atch-e-e-ew!"

"What's going on there?" cried a voice from amidsthips.

"Kerry's coming up," whispered the Swaggerer; "not a moment to lose. Down with you."

"Hi! bring a lantern here," roared Kerry. "What's this—a boat lowered? Stop, or I'll fire into you!"

"Fire away," growled the Swaggerer, as he cut the boat free with an axe.

In a moment the ship was going on ahead. Shouts were heard on deck, and lanterns were dancing about.

They could hear the voice of Abraham Spanker at its loudest.

"I wonder whether he will see any fun in this job?" said the Swaggerer. "Pull on, Panther. We'll keep her in sight until she goes down."

"They know what's happened," said the Panther. "Harken!"

The voice of Abraham Spanker rang over the sea—

"The ship's scuttled! Lower the boats!"

"Aye, lower them if you can!" said the Panther; "and when lowered, how long do you think they will float?"

"See her lights there—all on a slant," cried the Swaggerer. "She is going down by the head."

"This is awful!" gasped Dribbles. "I can't look on."

"Then don't," said the Panther.

"Now look at her," the Swaggerer said, in a tone of triumph. "Houp-la! Hurrah for the auger! Twenty-three holes I've bored in her, and I drew all the plugs."

"Help, help!" cried the doomed men in the ship.

"There's none for you, my lads!" shouted the Swaggerer. "You are doomed."

He could hear them struggling to get the boats free, and could see the lights moving about.

Presently some of them began to ascend.

"They are taking to the rigging," he cried; "she is going down. Give her a cheer, boys!"

"Hurrah!"

Only the Panther responded to his call. The sight of such a treacherous deed consummated was more than even the hardened Pantaloon and the cowardly Sneezer could bear.

They sat huddled up, with their eyes cast down, and their fingers in their ears.

Yells came from the deck of the "Rattlesnake," and the captain and mate fired their revolvers as signals of distress.

They signalled only to their enemies, and to a deserted sea.

The lights in the rigging moved up and down, then suddenly appeared to be moving in a circular direction.

The Swaggerer shouted with glee.

"It's all over. Down they go!" he cried.

And as he spoke, the lights glided rapidly down, an awful cry rent the air, and the "Rattlesnake" went under a hundred fathoms of sea.

The Panther rested on the oars, and looked at the blank left by its disappearance. No light was visible on sea or sky.

"'Tis done," he said.

"Aye, and well done," said the Swaggerer.

"And we are answerable for another half-score lives."

"Have you grown chicken-hearted?" demanded the Swaggerer, scornfully. "It was a blow for life and liberty, and we've gained both. Pull on, I'll take you to the shore; the tide is in our favour."

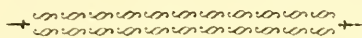
The Panther said no more, but, with a sound that was like a sigh, bent to his work, and pulled on.

"So perish all my foes!" cried the Swaggerer, as he settled in the stern.

"All but one," said a hollow voice near him.

He started, and turned cold, his trembling fingers dropping the tiller-lines.

He did not recognise the voice, and dared not ask who it was. And yet it was only the Sneezer, who was thinking of Jack, and involuntarily gave vent to what was in his mind.



CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE DEEP BLUE SEA—LAND IN SIGHT—A PRETTY LITTLE FARCE ARRANGED.

THE success of their plot put the Panther and Swaggerer into good-humour, and Sneezer and the Pantaloon, instead of getting a drubbing as they expected, found themselves not only tolerated, but made welcome in the boat.

"After all," said the Swaggerer, "I'm glad you two fellows came. As a matter of fact, I may say I intended you should come. I never desert an old pal."

"Never!" said the Panther, showing all his teeth with a smile that would have passed for a snarl.

"Of course not," said Dribbles the Sneezer.

"And what say you, old Panty?" said the Swaggerer, giving the Pantaloon a terrific smack on the back.

"Oh—ugh—dear!" was all the Pantaloon could say, the blow left him so little breath.

"We will live happy in the new land," said the Swaggerer, "like brothers. Life is a jolly sort of thing, after all."

"I wonder where young Jack is?" said the Panther, resting on his oars. "I'll bet he'll drop on us some day."

"Lord help us then," sighed Dribbles, looking up at the stars, as if he expected to see Jack descending upon them like a thunderbolt.

"I'm thankful to say that my hands are clean of the last job," muttered the Pantaloon, under his breath.

The Swaggerer turned quickly upon him.

"Look here, old Pharisee," he said, "I just warn you not to smooth the feathers of your conscience with that sort of stuff. You've done enough to get your full share of brimstone when you die."

"And your time can't be far away," grinned the Panther.

The old man groaned, and curled himself up in the bottom of the boat.

"If I only had my time over again," he muttered.

The next moment he received a kick from the Swaggerer, who bade him take the oars.

"It's turn and turn about in this boat," he said.

And so it proved from that hour, but the turn and turn about was between Dribbles and the Pantaloon, while the other two sat in the stern, and smoked and chatted, or cast looks of terrible meaning at their two companions.

The boat was roughly provisioned, but there was enough biscuit and water for all. The little meat and spirits the Swaggerer had been able to smuggle, he divided between the Panther and himself.

"You fellows have been overfed," he told the others, "you are too gross, and I must bring you down a bit."

"A blight rest upon you," thought the old Pantaloon; "but I'll bring you down some day."

They were two nights and the better part of two days in the open boat, but on the eve of the second day they sighted land.

The coast looked hospitable enough in itself, and there were people moving about.

The Swaggerer stood up in the boat to take a look at them.

"What are they like?" asked the Panther.

"Civilised, with togs of a Spanish cut," replied the Swaggerer. "I see a lot of horses tethered together a little way inland, and I know what these fellows are."

"Horse-riders, perhaps," suggested the Sneezer.

"You idiot," snarled the Swaggerer;

"if he makes another remark like that, throw him overboard. These men are hunters."

"A rough lot," said the Panther.

"But sure to have some grub and good things with them," returned the Swaggerer. "Now to perform the shipwreck trick. Look sickly, all of you. Whiten old Panty with a kick in the ribs. Sneezer always carries his white lion in his cheeks."

The Panther did as he was bidden, and a ferocious kick laid the Pantaloon in the bottom of the boat groaning and rolling his eyes.

"He'll do," grinned the Swaggerer; "here's my afflicted father, gentlemen, whose age was against his bearing the exposure and fatigue. Father dear, bear up—help is at hand."

He raised the exasperated Pantaloon up a little, and put his head upon his shoulder.

"Now you move, you old beggar," he said, "and I'll give you a taste of cold steel between your ribs. Panther, whiten your cheeks—I know you can do it."

The Panther first grinned, then composed his visage, and with a tremendous effort drove the blood from his face.

The amazed and terrified Sneezer saw it die out from under the tan of his cheeks, and leave him like the corpse of a mulatto.

"Will that do?" he asked.

"Good," said the Swaggerer. "Now pull in, Sneezer, and pull your hardest, so that you really may be pumped when

we touch land. They've spotted us, and are gathered together in a cluster.

"Father dear!" he said, turning to the Pantaloon, with the mocking smile of a demon.

"What now?" groaned the Pantaloon.

"Do you feel better?"

"No, I don't."

"I'm sorry for that; you must have a little more physick. Lie down, Panther, and scratch his calves with your knife. Bleeding limbs will make him interesting."

"Have mercy on me," groaned the wretched old man. "I'm as ill as you like—dying, dead. Let me alone."

"One little touch," said the Panther, "pricking him with his knife out of sheer malice. Ah, for an old one, he bleeds pretty well."

"We are nearing land, father dear," said the Swaggerer; "groan and look thankful, you old image."

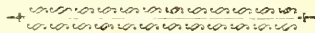
"I can groan easily," said the Pantaloon, "and I'll try to look thankful."

"The strangers on the shore are Spanish," said the Swaggerer. "Now to see what sort of welcome we shall get. Remember, all of you, that I'm spokesman. If they speak Spanish, I can answer them."

"But we sha'n't understand," said the Sneezer.

"All you've got to do is to look as if you were dying," replied the Swaggerer, "and leave the rest to me."

And as he spoke, the boat touched land, and a body of half-caste Spaniards, numbering about a dozen, lounged towards them with careless grace.



CHAPTER XXIV.

WELCOME HELP—OTHER FRIENDS OF ANOTHER COLOUR—IS IT CHANCE OR FATE?

THE foremost man was grey-headed, and his drooping moustache was as white as snow. He may have been sixty years of age, but seemed to have retained the fire of his youth, and wore his Mexican costume jauntily.

The others behind him were men of various ages, down to a lad of sixteen, and all wore the sombrero, shirt, jacket, sash, knee-breeches, and boots with silver spurs.

The only variation in their dresses was in the colour of the material—brown, red, blue, or green, according to the wearer's fancy.

The Swaggerer, with the Pantaloon's head still upon his shoulder, made signs of distress. The Panther looked up with a livid face, and the Sneezer groaned.

"Senor," said the leader, speaking in very good English, "your servant."

"You speak our language," said the Swaggerer.

"I have that pleasure. I saw at once that you were English. You have been shipwrecked."

"It is our misfortune. These friends of mine, my aged father, and myself, are all that is left of the crew and passengers of the 'Rattlesnake.'"

"Where bound for?"

"New York."

"Ah," said the Spaniard, twirling his moustache, "caught in a gale?"

"A terrible one," replied the Swaggerer; "and we sprang a leak, and took to the boats. We have reason to believe we are the sole survivors."

"Of course we are," said the Sneezer, anxious to distinguish himself.

"Why of course?" asked the Spaniard.

"His mind is demented," said the Swaggerer, sadly. "Do not heed him. So is that of my aged father here."

The Pantaloon, who did not like the aged father business at all, not knowing whither it might lead him, looked ghastly. He was nearly bursting with suppressed fury.

But what could he say or do?

"Well," said the Spaniard, "it appears to me, senor, that you have had a rough time of it. But we can help you very little. We are only camping here for to-day. To-morrow we go inland in search of wild horses."

"Perhaps you can guide us to the nearest town," said the Panther.

"Anywhere but New York," added the Sneezer.

"You hear," said the Swaggerer, with a forced smile—"quite gone. Father dear will be talking nonsense next."

Father dear looked as if he would have liked to say something, but restrained himself for certain reasons. The Swaggerer rose, and signed to the Panther.

"Take his legs," he said; "my aged father must be carried."

The Panther took his legs as desired. He had strong, pliant fingers, and at the same time he laid hold of fleshy parts of the limbs, and pinched them.

The Pantaloon dared not struggle violently, but he groaned prodigiously.

The Sneezer had left the boat last, and

from sitting so long he was really very weak upon his feet. He lurched about like one filled with good wine, or bad spirits, or anything that intoxicates, and fell up against the Spaniard.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I hope I haven't hurt you."

"Drink of this," said the Spaniard, handing him a flask.

Dribbles needed no second invitation, but poured the welcome liquor down his throat.

"Save a drop for me," said the Pantaloon, who had been deposited in a sitting position on the ground.

Sneezer smiled gently, and handed back the flask.

"Too late, old man," he said.

"Confound your greedy skin!" cried the Pantaloon, getting up nimbly with the object of rushing at him.

But the Swaggerer was too quick for him. He rushed in, and, under the pretence of helping him, tripped and threw him heavily.

"Father, dear," he said, leaning over him, "you must not get excited. Have you hurt yourself?"

Father dear was driven to the very verge of madness by this question. Had he hurt himself!

"By the Furies!" he said, in an undertone, "you shall pay for this."

"Move again," said the Swaggerer, in the same tone, "and I'll arrange your funeral."

The Spaniards stood by watching what passed with inpressive faces. What they understood or thought they kept to themselves.

The leader conferred with them apart for a few minutes, and then came back to the interesting victims of the shipwreck.

"Such food as we have is yours," he said. "We have no shelter. Sufficient for the night we give."

The Spaniards had a rough camp under the lee of some adjacent rocks. Each man had his rug thrown carelessly on the ground, the whole forming an imperfect circle.

In the centre were the materials for a fire, which was lighted as the night drew on, and the whole party gathered around it.

They were not a talkative body, and the new arrivals were ill at ease; even

the Swaggerer, who seemed to have found something delightful in playing the affectionate son to the exasperated Pantaloon, found that business tiresome, and gave it up.

The Spaniards exchanged but few words, and smoked their cigarettes in silence. They drank little, and the supply of strong liquor was limited.

But there was plenty of dried buffalo, which was rich fare after so much biscuit and bad pickled pork, and even the "aged suffering father" ate heartily.

"Senor," said the leader to the Swaggerer, "we shall go away at dawn, and we must leave you here."

"The deuce you must!" said the Swaggerer. "Then I suppose we shall starve?"

"No," was the answer; "we can give you a breakfast, and send to you some friends of ours, who are not far away. They will take care of you."

"I am grateful," replied the Swaggerer, with affected humility. Then obeying an irresistible impulse, he turned to the Pantaloon and added: "You hear that, father dear? Be thankful!"

The Pantaloon muttered something that might have been thanks, but his eye was evil.

The Panther burst into a fit of laughter.

"It makes me glad," he said to the Spaniard; "your kindness is very touching."

"You English laugh at everything," replied the Spaniard, "even when you are going to be hanged."

But English though they were, they did not laugh at that; on the contrary, a portentous gravity fell upon them all, and the hapless Dribbles had a fit of sneezing that made him hop about like a parched pea in a frying-pan.

The Spaniards lay down to rest, and by some of them sharing their blankets with each other they found covering for the strangers.

But they lay a little apart, as if to avoid their guests.

The Swaggerer and his companions fell asleep, and slept long.

When they awoke, the Spaniards were nowhere to be seen.

"Now what may this mean?" cried

the Swaggerer, leaping to his feet, an example followed by the rest.

"There they go," said the Panther, pointing to a body of moving figures in the distance.

"Anyhow they've been civil enough to leave us some breakfast," said the Sneezer.

"But will they send their friends?" asked the Pantaloon.

"We will wait and see, father dear," replied the Swaggerer.

"Oh, drop that game," growled the Pantaloon; "it riles me more than you think."

"Govern your passion, my friend," said the Swaggerer, "for be sure that if it is my humour to call you father, or anything else, I'll do it. Now, Sneezer, pass up the beef."

They had breakfast, and found they had enough left for another meal. Then they looked about them, and debated what they should do.

"Give the Spaniards' friends an hour or two," said the Swaggerer, "and if they don't turn up, we'll go along the coast until we find some other fools to feed us."

"And if we don't find them?" asked Dribbles.

"We shall find something to eat," replied the Panther, with a meaning look at him, and Dribbles closed his eyes and sneezed.

Ere noon they saw the promised friends approaching on foot, and as they drew near, the Swaggerer made out a leader who looked like a Spanish seaman.

His followers were Lascars, and they were all armed.

"I don't like the look of that lot," said the Panther.

But any attempt to fly would have been fruitless, and they waited for the newcomers, who were speedily upon them.

The leader saluted.

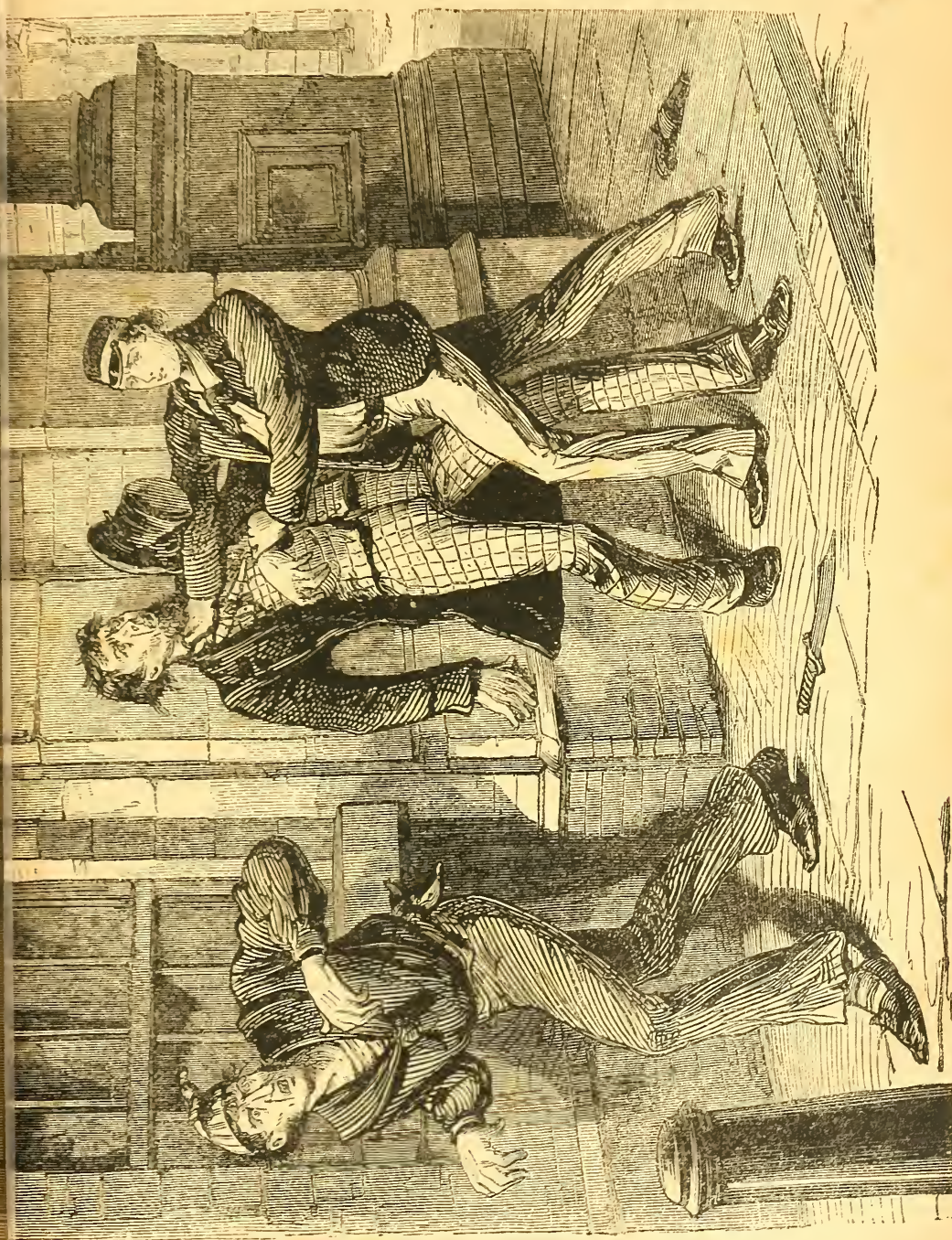
"Four shipwreck Englesemen?" he said.

"Yes," replied the Swaggerer.

"Good, senor; will you come with me?"

"Where to?"

"Beyond yon rising land lies our ship," was the answer, and the speaker looked at the four in a peculiar manner



"JACK HAD HIS OPPONENT FIXED AGAINST THE WALL, DAZED AND BEATEN."

"But suppose we would rather remain on land?" said the Swaggerer.

"Senores," said the other, "we are short-handed, and we call upon you to help us."

"But if we refuse?"

"Senor, we can take no refusal."

There was no mistaking the tone, and the Swaggerer, making a grimace, replied—

"You are not to be denied, and we will come."

The Lascars, in obedience to a sign from their leader, surrounded the pressed men, and they started.

After a march of half-a-dozen miles, they came in sight of the ship, a large Spanish trader, lying in a small bay.

A boat was on the shore, awaiting them, and being a large one, it took them all on board.

The captain, a swarthy Mexican, received them gravely, but there was a mocking smile about his lips as he welcomed the addition to his crew.

"Englesemen," he said, "are good sailors; "you come as water to the thirsty traveller."

They did not answer him, and he, turning away, gave orders for the anchor to be weighed.

A wind from the land favoured them, and they stood out to sea.

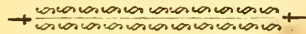
The man who had commanded the Lascars put the four into a watch, and gave them an outline of the duties they had to perform.

"And may I ask where we are bound for?" asked the Swaggerer.

"Senor," was the answer, "we hope, with the aid of the Virgin and favourable winds, to reach New York ere the month is out."

The Swaggerer answered not, but his lip quivered as he moved away.

"Is this fate or chance?" he groaned inwardly; "is there no escape from the avenger? But away with fear; we are four to one yet, and the odds are in my favour."



CHAPTER XXV.

NEW YORK—JACOB STURMBY AND OLD BEN—ANXIOUS HOURS AND AN ARRIVAL.

IN a room in one of the houses in a quiet street in New York sat Jacob Sturmbly and old Ben.

Their ragged attire was in strong contrast to the neat modern furniture, and they were, as far as feeling was concerned, very much out of their element.

But they had come hither in obedience to orders, and they were awaiting the arrival of Jack.

Old Ben had lost some of the vacancy of mind that had followed the untimely death of his son, and he only fell away at intervals into the mental oblivion in which Jack found him.

He knew everything now, and thirsted for vengeance, but his hands were tied.

Jack had drawn from him a promise that he would leave everything to him.

"My wrongs have the first call," he said; "when they are avenged, yours may come to the front."

"When you are satisfied," said Ben, "I must be so, too."

The "Rattlesnake" had put them

ashore on the coast of Mexico, and for a while they travelled together across the country.

But one night Jack said—

"You must go on by yourselves. I wish to be alone. Make your way to New York, and leave a letter at the post-office telling me where I shall find you."

"And you?" asked Sturmbly. "What route will you take?"

"I shall have the stars for my guide," said Jack, looking at the spangled heavens, "and I shall not be far behind you."

So they left him to pursue his solitary way, and crossed the mainland, sometimes alone, sometimes in company with traders, and passing through Mexico city, finally reached Vera Cruz.

Here they found a ship glad of their services, and worked their way to New York, and there they had been five weeks when we find them.

Evening had come, and they sat by the window, looking at the passengers

in the street, but not thinking of them. Their minds were far away with the absent.

"It is time, and more than time," said Sturmby, suddenly breaking the silence, "that we heard of him."

"Ah, just so," replied old Ben; "but it seems to me that we shall hear of him no more."

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Jacob Sturmby, alarmed. "It isn't time to croak yet."

"Time or not," said the old man, doggedly, "I dreamt last night that I saw him stretched out on the plain with the vultures over him. That ought to count for something."

"I wonder what his idea was in coming on alone," said Sturmby, restlessly; "and why did he leave the ship?"

"That was a sort of superstition, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes. Having in a way missed with Jim Black, he thought it best to leave the 'Rattlesnake.' He's got his own notions of revenge, and he'll carry them out."

"If he's alive."

"Ben, I won't hear you croaking. I was up town to-day, and asked about the 'Rattlesnake.' She's now long overdue, and they have given her up."

"That's a hitch," said Ben.

"So it is," returned Sturmby; "and I'll tell you another sort of hitch that's coming on. My little stock of money is running out. We are all right here as long as we pay, but when we don't, we shall be wrong, friend."

"We must work, Jacob."

"Aye, that's very well. I've tried to get it, but my rig-out is against me. 'We've got no beavers here,' says one. 'Is there a strike on the prairies?' axes another; and that's the way they chaff me."

"We sha'n't get work here, you think?"

"I'm dead certain that we sha'n't. Hush! isn't that a knock?"

"Aye, sure, and that's his voice."

They both leapt up, just in time to see the door open, and Jack appear. He looked wan and worn, but the fire of his eye was undimmed.

"I am behind my time," he said, as

he gave a hand to each; "but let it suffice that I am here."

"Welcome, dear lad," said Jacob Sturmby, and old Ben murmured his greeting.

"I won't ask you for news," said Jack, as he took a seat, "for you can tell me nothing I do not know. The 'Rattlesnake' is lost. They have given up all hope of her."

"And no survivors?" said Sturmby

"My enemies still live."

"You have heard of them?" said Sturmby, raising his eyes.

"Ah, I hear from them and about them, here," said Jack, smiting his breast; "my heart tells me that they are among the living."

"And living where, dear lad?"

"We shall know that in time. The world is very small. But hide where they may, they shall not escape me."

He rose up, and, walking to the window, stood there looking out.

The others said no more, for they knew that it was his humour when not speaking not to be spoken to.

The lamps were being lighted in the street, and the gloom of night creeping down. The ordinary business of the day was almost over, and clerks and shopmen were hurrying home.

"Jacob," said Jack, after a long silence, "can you give me anything to eat? I have tasted nothing all day."

"Dear lad," exclaimed Jacob, amazed, "why didn't you say so before? You must have been starving!"

"No; it was my choice," replied Jack, sadly. "Two days ago I was here, in New York, but I wandered forth again. Shall I tell you why?"

"Aye, do, lad."

"I saw the spirit of my brother Willie in the Broadway as I was coming hither."

"It must have been fancy."

"No, Jacob—no. I saw him on ahead. Do you think I should not have known him anywhere? These eyes of mine beheld my murdered brother."

"It must have been somebody resembling him," urged Jacob.

"Could I be mistaken?" exclaimed Jack, impatiently. "I know his figure, and, what is more, he turned, and I saw his face. Amazed I stood for a moment,

then somebody came between us, and he was gone."

"Master Jack," said old Ben, laying a hand upon his arm, and looking up wildly into his face, "take me to that street."

"Why should I do so, Ben?"

"Mayhap I'll find my Bill there. It may be the place where the spirits walk."

"No, Ben," said Jack, sadly. "I should have seen my brother anywhere, for his image was here," touching his forehead, "and my conscience conjured him up. He came as a reproach to me, for flagging in my work."

Jacob Sturmby, who had been busy plugging some viands, which he took from a cupboard, on the table, now bade him eat.

He sat down and partook of a crust of bread and some water.

Then he arose again.

"You are starving yourself," said Sturmby. "Try a little wine or something."

"I have walked two days and nights about this great city," replied Jack, "and felt no hunger. But have no fear. I am well enough. I shall eat by-and-by."

He was moving towards the door, and Jacob Sturmby, in surprise, asked him if he were going out again.

"For a while," he said; "I cannot sleep yet. Can I get in here late?"

"I will sit up for you."

"I am going to replenish my purse," said Jack; "since I have no time to labour, it must be filled by other means."

Old Ben was not heeding him now. One of his fits of vacancy had come upon him, and he was talking to his dead boy as if he sat in life and health beside him.

But Jacob Sturmby noted the words of Jack, and looked at him with pained curiosity.

"Without labour," he said, "there is no way of making money here."

"There are a thousand ways," replied Jack, "and I have found a friend who assists me. I put down a coin, and he covers it with a score. Sit up for me—I shall return."

"A friend here!" muttered Jacob Sturmby; "who can it be? Lord help the lad if he's taken to rough ways of making money."

"And now, Bill," said old Ben, rising, "having rested, we'll get on. You've lain a long time on the ground, surely, and there'll be little got to-day."

"Ben," said Jacob Sturmby, taking him by the arm, and pushing him gently back into the seat, "you are not to move yet; your boy's too tired."

"If that's so, he shall not," replied the old man, looking at him doubtfully; "but I don't know you."

Ben resumed his seat, and Sturmby took his.

In a little while the former was asleep; but the latter kept his watchful eyes upon the street.

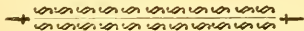
The hours went by, and he scarcely moved. The thoroughfare thinned and emptied; midnight arrived, and yet no sign of Jack.

"He can't be long now," said Sturmby, uneasily, and rising, went to the front door softly, so as not to disturb the house.

He looked up and down the street, but no living being was to be seen, and a dread foreboding took possession of him.

"Where is he?" he asked, "and who is this friend in whom he trusts? Can his name be Robbery? Heaven save the lad, and keep him from that. But he's desperate, and will not let little or big things stand between him and his vengeance."

But Jacob Sturmby judged Jack as he would judge the world in general. He did not thoroughly understand our hero.



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GAMBLING SALOON—LUCK BEYOND LUCK—JACK'S LIFE IN DANGER.

JACK had as few vices as any young fellow of his age, and above all he was not a gambler.

Yet he was going to gamble that night.

His little stock of money was almost exhausted.

"I do it to aid me in my vengeance," he said.

He had some knowledge of the world, and had learnt something of the history of New York, and he turned his steps to a street at the back of the Broadway.

Externally it was quiet and respectable, and a saloon in its centre was quite sober in its appearance. Into this Jack entered.

"I want to see the major," he said to the barman.

"Third door on the right, sir," was the reply. "Knock three times."

Jack obeyed these instructions, and speedily found himself in a back room, where there were at least forty men, half of them engaged at a roulette-table, the rest drinking.

The gamblers were all intent upon the game.

Not even the advent of a mere youth in sailor's dress attracted more than a glance.

The *tailleur* or croupier governing the table, was a quick-speaking, dark-eyed man, with hands that did marvels in the way of paying out his losses and raking in his winnings.

He saw Jack, and with his rake touched the hand of a man who was not playing, and apparently had no interest in the game.

He rose, and Jack took his seat.

"Many can play as well as one, and one as well as many," said the croupier. "While the ball is rolling, you can make your game."

Jack put five dollars on the red, and the red turned up.

The croupier paid him five.

Next he put half his money on number three, and left the rest on the red.

The croupier smiled to himself. It was a fool's game.

But, lo! the fool was successful, and a big pile of dollars passed over to Jack, for the number winning brought him in thirty-five times the amount of his stake.

Next he placed fifty dollars on the red, and lost.

This appeared to nettle him, and he put a hundred on it—nearly all he had. Fortune again favoured him.

When his money was passed to him, he left it on the red. Several of the players now noticed him, among them a lean saw-toothed man, who looked ravenously at the pile of money Jack had won.

Again the red turned up.

"The devil is loose to-night," somebody was heard to say, and the croupier's face darkened.

Jack put a handful of dollars on number three again.

"That's madness," said somebody, aloud; "he won on that before."

But madness was triumphant. It was just three hundred and sixty to one against him, but Jack won.

The croupier paid out with a nervous hand, and, with a motion of his eyebrows, drew a tall, gentlemanly man, who had been looking on, to his side.

"The bank can't stand another shake," he said, in a tone that only reached the ears he intended.

"Then the bank must stop," was the reply, conveyed in words that were spoken without a movement of the lips.

Jack put a handful of dollars on the black.

"A stake for villainy," he said, unconsciously aloud.

"Pardon, monsieur?" said the croupier.

"I was thinking aloud," replied Jack. "My words had no reference to you or anybody here."

"It is well, monsieur," was the answer. "Make your game, gentlemen—the ball is rolling. Now! Black wins!"

He paid out to Jack all he had with-

out a change of face, and calmly took the ball out of the "pond" in the middle of the table.

"Messieurs," he said, "for to-night the game is ended."

"He has broken the bank," was whispered round, and many hungry, curious eyes were fixed upon him.

And none were more hungry and curious than those of the thin sallow-faced man.

"He takes it well," he said; "it is nothing to him. What would it have been to me?"

He was a fraudulent manager of a large house of business, and he had long been spending his employer's money. He came that night to get it back, and lost more.

"Ill-gotten gains," thought Jack, as he crammed the notes and gold into his pockets, "to be spent for a good purpose."

He walked to a table in the centre of the room, on which stood a number of decanters, and filled a glass with sherry.

He was about to raise it to his lips, when he caught the eye of the sallow-faced man fixed upon him.

"Well, friend," he said, "what do you want?"

"Nothing, nothing," replied the other, hurriedly; "you have been lucky, and I have not, and I was—was—"

Jack drank his wine, and put down the glass.

"One word," he said. "I don't like people staring at me."

"Perhaps if I had won, you would have stared at me," said the other.

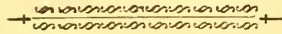
"Not I," said Jack, contemptuously, and turned away.

"I knew it," groaned the sallow-faced man; "the money is nothing to him, it is everything to me—death or life."

"For a moment he covered his face with his hands, then looked up, and saw that Jack was leaving the room.

"Yes; I'll do it," he muttered, and with a hurried hand filled a tumbler with brandy.

"He is but a youth," he muttered, as he hastened on Jack's trail; "what of that? Better to die ere your soul is black with sin. As for me, it is but one more sin, and money to me is a matter of life and death. Aye, I'll do it."



CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ATTEMPT ON JACK'S LIFE—A RECOGNITION—A GENEROUS FOE.

UNCONSCIOUS of being followed, Jack turned into the street again, and in a meditative mood walked slowly on. It was past midnight, and few people were about.

And those who were abroad for the most part were homeless, or night prowlers in search of plunder, such as we find in all great cities.

Fortune had favoured Jack, but he cared not for the money for the money's sake. It was the need of it that tempted him to try a game of chance.

He had been successful beyond his hopes, but the gambler's spirit was not in him, and could not be roused.

It was a million to one against his trying that doubtful road to fortune again.

But he knew that his faithful followers were on the verge of want, and for their sakes, as much as his own, he

had gone to the gambling saloon that night.

On he went, thinking, but with no thought of the money in his pockets.

Behind him came the sallow-faced man, thinking of money and murder.

For the paltry coins and strips of paper currency he was ready to cut short a young and vigorous life.

He was as remorseless as death itself.

Across the Broadway, and into another street they went, Jack and his would-be murderer.

It was quiet there, and the sallow-faced man thought he could kill him safely.

"The knife is the weapon here," he muttered, and drew a formidable bowie from its sheath.

The bright blade glittered in the light of a lamp, as he moved on more quickly and drew nearer to Jack.

One glance around to see if the coast was clear.

Only one man coming down the street.

"This for him if he interferes," muttered the sallow-faced man, as he drew a revolver.

He had forgotten the lock, and the click of it was loud enough to reach Jack's quick ear.

Accustomed to a life of peril for some time past, he instinctively scented danger.

Wheeling round, he stood face to face with his would-be murderer, who staggered back a pace.

Jack saw the weapons in his hands, and without parley sprang upon him, seizing him by the wrist.

"Drop them," he said, "or I'll dash your head against the wall."

"Hands off!" cried the other, hoarsely.

"Drop your weapons," said Jack, sternly, and the man answered with an effort to throw him.

But Jack was supple and strong, and, in a moment, the sallow-faced man felt himself come in contact with the wall, and saw stars with a vengeance.

Maddened, he tried to shoot Jack, but the bullet whistled harmlessly across the street.

It went very near to the man who was sauntering down, and he uttered an howl of affright.

"What's that?" he cried.

Then, seeing that he was not personally aimed at, he crossed the street, to get a nearer view of the combatants.

Jack now had his opponent fixed against the wall, dazed and beaten.

The knife and the revolver lay on the ground.

Hearing somebody advancing, he turned his face, and cried out—

"Will you go and find a policeman? I want to give this fellow in charge."

To his amazement the man he addressed, whom he could but imperfectly see, uttered a shriek of affright, and bolted at a tremendous pace.

But he would not have been amazed if he had known who it was.

It was Walker Dribbles the Sneezer.

Jack smiled at the rapidity of his retreat, and looked up and down the street for another messenger.

There was not a soul in sight.

"You dog!" he said to the sallow-faced man, "what shall I do with you?"

"Mercy!" gasped the would-be murderer; "I was driven to it. I'm a ruined man."

Jack pushed him away, and picked up the bowie and revolver.

"Stand still, or I will fire," he said.

"Now tell me your story."

"I am in employment," he replied, "and I've robbed my employer. I wanted to replace the money."

"And tried to do so in the gambling saloon," said Jack.

"Yes."

"And failing there, you would have robbed and murdered me?"

"It's true," replied the man, hanging his head. "I was desperate. I am desperate, for I have not a cent in the world."

"Have you robbed your masters of much?"

"Many thousand dollars."

"Then I cannot help you," said Jack, "except to save you from a prison. See, here is some money. Fly!"

This man stared at the handful of dollars and notes which Jack held out towards him. Such magnanimity utterly amazed him.

"This is a vast country," said Jack, "and there are fields of labour where a man of energy may grow rich. Go, seek one, and try to restore that which you have stolen. Take this money. Good-night."

He thrust the coins and notes into the man's hand, and was moving away, when the other followed him.

"One moment, sir," he said, "I—I want to say something."

"You will get no more," replied Jack.

"Heaven knows I don't want," said the sallow-faced man. "You bow me down to the earth with shame by your generosity. I only wanted to ask you not to judge me by my mad attempt on your life to-night."

"I will not judge you at all," replied Jack.

"And you forgive me?"

"Readily."

"But don't forget," said the other, eagerly. "Keep me in mind, for one day we may meet again, and I be able

to give you some return for this. If ever I can help you I will, though it cost me my life."

He brushed his hand across his eyes, swung round on his heel, and walked away.

"The world is very narrow," said Jack, "and we may meet again. I shall then see what your protestations are worth, my friend."

He moved on, little dreaming of what was lying in the future.

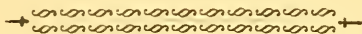
But so it is, we all sow and surely

reap. A kind word, a generous act, is often like a grain of seed sown in the ground; by-and-by it becomes a tree, and brings forth fruit.

Mark the nature of the act, too.

Jack could readily pardon a wrong done to himself, but an injury to those he loved he could not forgive.

Keeping a more wary eye on things around him, he bent his steps towards his temporary home; it was not far away, but he was not destined to reach it that night.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW THE FOUR CAME TO NEW YORK—MAKEPEACE JIBBER'S SALOON—DOUBTFUL COMPANY.

THE Sneezer was scared pretty well out of his wits, but he had sense enough to know which way he was going.

Like a startled rabbit, he made as straight as he could for his burrow.

At that time he was residing with his companions in a house of accommodation for travellers with limited purses in the purlieus of New York.

They had done their work pretty well on board the Spanish trader, but had received no pay.

"Senores," said the captain, when they arrived in port, "you are now free to go where you please, and I shall be glad not to trouble you if you don't trouble me."

"You will give us seaman's pay, I suppose?" said the Swaggerer.

"I will give you nothing," replied the Spaniard, "and if you are not satisfied, apply to the court, where you will probably get pay of another description."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the Swaggerer, putting on as bold a face as he could.

"In the United States," was the reply, "they do not often hang. But there are extreme cases where they use the rope. I never interfere with men unless they are troublesome. You had better go."

The Swaggerer was in the main a coward, and he inclined to this opinion also. He tried to accept things with a good grace.

"Very well," he said, with a dismal laugh; "money isn't much object to us. You've brought us safe, and that's something. Come along, my hearties."

"If I had that man in a quiet corner," said the Panther, as he stepped ashore, "I'd cut his heart out."

"It's no use jawing," said the Swaggerer, surlily, "he's got the upper hand of us."

"Not he," snarled the Panther; "he only guessed at things."

"Go back and tell him so," sneered the Swaggerer.

"Send Old Aged," suggested the Panther, "it wouldn't matter if they hanged him. It would only cut short his life by a few months."

"Can't you drop that subject?" cried the Pantaloon, turning white. "Perhaps I may outlive you all."

"Oh, no," said Sneezer. "We shall all swing together, unless young Jack saves the hangman a job. Oh, dear—oh, dear! why didn't I live a decent life?"

And here he sneezed so, that a number of spectators stared at him in amazement.

The Swaggerer hurried on, cursing his anatomy in general, and his nose in particular, and the Panther strode beside him.

The Pantaloon and Sneezer brought up the rear, and together they sought shelter to suit their tastes and pockets.

They found it in the abode of one

Makepeace Jibber, a long lanky ruffian, a bully, or whatever answered his turn.

He had led a roving life, and had left his mark out San Francisco way, but just now he was what he called resting, and having taken a house, opened a whisky-saloon, and let beds.

He soon had birds of the same colour with him, and Jibber's saloon was soon known to the police.

They knew it too well to go near or interfere much with it.

Passing this place, the Swaggerer saw that it would do. Makepeace Jibber, after a brief interview, accepted them as lodgers.

"And why?" he said. "Let me be candid, for I am a candid man: I accept you because you are not blessed with pride or money."

"We are not," said the Panther.

"And your game," continued Jibber, "is to live as long as you can at a place, and then skedaddle. See, I know you."

As this had been in the minds of the Swaggerer and his friends, they looked a little sheepish, but Makepeace Jibber laughed.

"I'm cute," he said, "and I'm candid. I take you in because I want some men, and you'll suit, I think. What do I wan't you for? Don't ask the question, but have a drink."

They asked no questions, and took up their abode with Jibber, and led a lively time, of a sort, with him.

On the night when Jack's life was attempted, a merry party had gathered round the hospitable board of Mr. Makepeace Jibber, in his own private room.

The apartment was kept very select, and strong objections were made if strangers attempted to enter.

Above all there was an antipathy to the company of the police.

The party numbered perhaps a dozen, and there was not one man among them whose hands had not taken the life of a fellow-creature.

Some, like the Panther and the Swaggerer, had a host of deadly sins upon their heads.

Makepeace Jibber sat at the head of the table, with the Swaggerer on his right, and the Panther on his left.

He had proved them of the right colour, and declared he loved them.

The Pantaloon sat a little lower down, quietly drinking himself into a state of forgetfulness, the only state which permitted him to be at all happy.

The Sneezer had gone to another part of the town with a message from Makepeace Jibber to a brother rascal, and was expected back every moment.

"Lads, one and all," said Jibber, rising, "a word with you."

"Silence!" roared the Swaggerer, rapping the table.

His face was flushed with drink, his eye insolent, and his air that of a bully.

"Of course he must say some," sneered one of the men at the other end of the table.

"Lads," said Jibber, "you know me, and I think I know you, and I think it's time I made my plans clear to you, for I'm an open-fisted man, and don't like sneakings."

He paused, and his listeners rattled their knuckles upon the table, crying, "Hear, hear!"

"We are men who don't like reg'lar work," Jibber went on. "We ain't born to it."

"Hear, hear!"

"And it isn't in our line while money is to be made any other way."

The "hear, hears" were loud at this, and Jibber paused and smiled like a man who had said a good thing, but wished to be modest over it.

"Our line is more in the way of easing others of what must be a burden to 'em, and when they rile up and begin to argue, we settle the thing right off. That's our ticket, I think."

"The ticket, and no other," was the answer.

"But cities ain't the place for us to work in."

"No, no."

"A lot of busybody people get interfering, and the police—"

"Down with the police!"

"No; we do thus," said Jibber; "we don't waste our precious energies on them, but go farther afield."

"Every place is worked in this State too free," said one man, gloomily.

"This State is nothing," said Makepeace Jibber. "But far away beyond, there's a road that's worked a bit, but not worked properly, and that's the overland route to San Francisco."

A quick movement on the part of some, and the drawing in of the breath of others, told that he had taken them by surprise.

"Between here and there," he said, "there's big peraries, and what's done there, nobody here need know. There are men and convoys coming overladen with the yellow dust, and if the work is done, who is to tell tales?"

He paused, and, after a silence, somebody said—

"Nobody."

"That's it," he said; "nobody—unless it's one of ourselves, and I suppose you are all in it with me?"

"All—all," they cried.

"That's enough," said Makepeace Jibber, "and I take your words, being an honest man myself. But first, for form's sake, I'll trouble you to cross your bowies here with me, and swear you may be powdered and shot if you turn traitor. Now—one and all."

Only the sign of crossing the knives was needed, and the act was carried out with fitting solemnity.

"Death to the traitor!" cried Jibber.

"Death—death!" they chorused.

"And to him who's known to think of turning one," said Jibber.

And then they cemented his words with bitter oaths, and had just settled down into their seats again, when the Sneezer came hurrying in.

His pale face, his agitated mien, drew all eyes upon him, but he only looked at the Swaggerer.

"Come here," he said.

The Swaggerer rose up and went to him.

It was a mere matter of form asking what had upset him.

He already guessed the truth, but he put the question mechanically.

"You've seen somebody?" he said.

"Yes," replied Sneezer. "I've—atchew!—atchew!—seen him. Oh, Lord, we are all done for!"

"Hush! be quiet, can't you!" said the Swaggerer, visibly disturbed himself. "Remember that we've never said a word about the 'Albatross.'"

"But I think you had better tell me,"

said Makepeace Jibber, who had come up quietly behind him. "I do so like to have things all fair and aboveboard."

"No doubt," said the Swaggerer, "but it isn't anything you are likely to know about."

"Still, just for form's sake, to keep peace and love between us," said Makepeace Jibber. "You needn't blab it out here, we'll talk it over by-and-by, dear boys."

The Swaggerer shrugged his shoulders, and they all returned to the table. The Sneezer went and sat down by the Pantaloon.

"What's the row?" asked the old man.

"Jack, our enemy, is here," replied Sneezer, "and how he got here is a thing that makes my hair stand up to think of it."

"Here!" repeated the Pantaloon, aghast.

"Not in this house," replied the Sneezer, "but in New York. I saw him to-night. He had a man, with pistol and knife, by the arms, and he held him as if he were a child."

"He saw you?"

"Of course he did."

"And what did he say?"

"I can't tell," said the Sneezer, with a wild stare. "The sight of him turned me upside down. He said something, and I fancy your name was in it."

"Then I'm next?" said the Pantaloon, and all the blood fled from his cheeks.

"There goes Jibber from the room," said Sneezer, "and the Panther and Swaggerer following. What does that mean?"

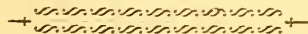
"You sha'n't go," hissed the Pantaloon, grasping him by the arm; "if Jack comes for me, he'll have both of us."

"Durst he come here?"

"He'd come anywhere for our lives."

"What are you two jabbering about?"

asked the Panther, coming up quietly behind them, and pinching their ears. "You fools! do you want everybody to know the murders we have done? Come, Jibber is going to help us."



CHAPTER XXIX.

JIBBER'S ADVICE—A FOOL'S SEARCH IN NEW YORK, AND AN UNEXPECTED FINDING.

"So that's your yarn?" said Makepeace, as the Swaggerer finished a very fancy story of the doings on board the "Albatross."

"Yes, that's it," the Swaggerer replied.

His three friends standing near nodded their heads, and said, "That's it."

Jibber had several private rooms, and the one they were now in might be called his very private apartment. Nobody ever entered it unless invited, and if an unwary or prying stranger showed his nose there, Jibber first shot or stabbed him, and then asked his business.

"So this lad, you say, shot the captain of the 'Albatross'?" said he.

The Swaggerer nodded.

"And because you stood up for him, this lad has sworn to pepper you?"

Another nod.

"And as he's such a dead-sure mark you rather funk meeting him?"

A third nod.

"Now that," said Jibber, with a delicious oiliness, "is what I call the un-a-dul-te-ra-ted trewth. Whittle me all over if it don't shine out of your very faces! But I think I'll take another version of that yarn."

The Swaggerer was taken aback, for Jibber seemingly had been absorbing the story, but he tried to laugh, and said—

"You don't believe it?"

"Do you expect it?" said Jibber.

"Now, mind this, you are one of my band, and I'm the captain. I like obedience, and I'll have it. Out with the whole thing, or snakes will be among you. There's not a man here who won't be food for worms in two minutes."

To give emphasis to his words, he drew a brace of revolvers, and cocked them.

He was one to four, but the Swaggerer gave in, and the rest followed.

A second story, and the true one was told this time.

"I don't blame you," said Jibber,

when it was concluded, "for trying a lie on first. That was nateral, and accordin' to your nature. But don't do it again. So you are all afraid of this boy?" he added, meditatively.

"We are," said the Swaggerer.

"And you are four men."

"You don't know him," said the Swaggerer, excitedly; "he's got the power of unnerving us when we meet—hasn't he, pals?"

"He takes the grit out of me," said the Panther; "and I don't mind taking a life if I get a chance."

"He's got some demon at the back of him," said the Pantaloon.

"And when I meet him, I—atchew!—atchew!" said Sneezer.

"Of course you do," said the Panther, giving him a kick; "you always do. One of these days your confounded sneezing will bring somebody to the scaffold."

"Many a true word spoke in jest," said Makepeace Jibber. "Now listen to me: you want this lad got rid of?"

"It would make us all free men," said the Swaggerer; "old Pantaloon would look forty years younger if young Jack was dead."

"Then I'll do the job for you," said Jibber. "Find out where he is."

"We'll go to-morrow," said the Swaggerer.

"No—now. There's no time to be lost. The day after to-morrow we leave here. I judge that he's a figger you ain't likely to miss. Go and find him."

A more uncongenial task could not have been set them, but the prospect of getting rid of their foe urged them on.

"If we meet, we are four to one," said the Swaggerer. "Sneezer, take us back to where you found him."

Now it so happened that Jack that night lost his way. New York was comparatively strange to him, and the streets were so much like one another that he could not find the one where he left his friends.

The darkness hid the number of the streets, and there was nobody to enquire

of, so he wandered hither and thither until he found himself once more in the Broadway.

He had not hurried himself, but simply sauntered along, undaunted by the peril he had recently escaped. It had indeed passed from his mind.

So it fell out that he was in the Broadway just as the quartette who had so much reason to dread him appeared in it, with Sneezer acting as guide.

There are many such strange meetings, as we may judge from our own lives. Chance, according to some, directs them, but in the view of others, Destiny guides our footsteps.

But Jack saw them ere they suspected his presence, and drew into the shadow of a doorway.

On they came, talking together a little boisterously, for drink was in their veins.

Even the Pantaloon was "frisky," and showed himself off in antics worthy of his stage namesake.

"Now which is the street?" asked the Swaggerer, pulling up within a few yards of the spot where Jack was concealed.

"The next on the right," replied Sneezer.

"Get along, then," said the Panther, "although I don't see what is to come of this prowling about."

"No more do I," said the Pantaloon; "let us go and have a drink somewhere."

"Fill up, my lads—come fill your glasses, And here's a health to all good lasses," sung he.

"Oh, don't howl here," the Panther said. "You will wake everybody up, and set them cursing the cats."

"I'll howl where or when I like," said the Pantaloon, defiantly.

"Then howl there," returned the Panther, dealing him a heavy blow in

the chest that laid him sprawling in the roadway.

Lying on his back, with his legs and arms extended, he presented a sufficiently ridiculous appearance to put his friends into fits of laughter, and they moved on, holding their sides with merriment.

The Pantaloon sat up, rubbed his chest, and scowled after them.

The lamps shone on his evil face, and he presented a perfect picture of a malevolent old man.

"Laugh away," he grunted, "but perhaps I'll be even with you yet. I'd like to have the chance of roasting you all. I'd keep the fire up, and turn the spit slowly."

He soon rose, and gave himself a shaking, grumbling and muttering.

As he was about to follow, a hand lightly touched his shoulder.

He turned, and stood face to face with Jack.

Immediately his eyes appeared to start out of his head, his nostrils dilated, and his mouth opened.

"You know me," said Jack, sternly.

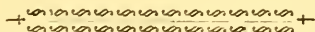
His lips moved, but he answered not.

"Murderer," said Jack, "I will call upon you next to answer for the crimes you committed on board the 'Albatross.' I give you a week to repent. At the end of that time I will call for you."

He placed his finger upon the forehead of the shrinking old man, as if setting a seal upon him, and then glided across the roadway and disappeared.

The Pantaloon had long lived in terror, but the mortal dread that now came over him was ten times more deadly than aught he had known before.

For a few moments he stood, with his hands clenched, and eyes staring ahead, and then, with broken feeble steps, followed in the wake of his friends.



CHAPTER XXX.

ANOTHER SCARE FOR ANOTHER ROGUE—MAKEPEACE JIBBER ACTS AS A CONSOLER WITH EFFECT—THE WORK OF TERROR.

"HARK!" said the Swaggerer; "who is that calling? That can't be the Pantaloon."

"But it is," replied the Panther;

"and that little tap I gave him seems to have brought on hoarseness. What now, old man?"

"Stop, stop!" groaned the Panta-

loon, as he came staggering up. "Don't go that way."

"Why not?"

"He isn't there; I've just left him." And, overcome with terror, he leaned against a house, and groaned bitterly.

"You left him!" said the Swaggerer; "why, we only left you ten minutes ago."

"It's a case of D.T.," said the Panther.

"It isn't," replied the Pantaloon, fiercely; "I'm as sober now as ever I was in my life; every drop of drink is gone out of me."

"But you can't have seen him," said the Sneezer, who was shaking all over, and nervously fiddling with his fingers.

"The moment you left me," said the Pantaloon, "he was before me, just as if he came out of the ground. He looked at me, and has given me seven days only to live."

"Seven days!" repeated the Swaggerer.

"To live. And at the end of that time he'll come for me. I know he'll do it, if I go as far as the moon."

In a paroxysm of terror, the wretched old sinner threw himself upon the ground, and howled like a wounded dog.

"This beats all," said the Swaggerer, looking nervously about him. "Pick him up, you fellows, and make him stop that row. We shall wake up the whole street."

The Panther, in a state of excessive fury and fear, seized the Pantaloon by the collar, and jerked him to his feet with no gentle hand.

"Take his arm, Sneezer," he said, "and let us hurry on."

"We will get back," said the Swaggerer, hurriedly. "It was a fool's quest we came upon. I'll see that we're not followed."

He bade them go on to the next turning, so as to make the road a little roundabout, and he brought up the rear, turning every minute, revolver in hand, to see if they were followed.

But the streets appeared to be clear behind them.

"It was a chance meeting," the Swaggerer said, aloud, "and young Jack is sharp enough to make the most of it. Seven days to live! The devil

take him! Can he choose his own time?"

"Yes; his own time for death!" cried a voice behind him.

The Swaggerer staggered forward a pace, and, tripping over some small obstacle, fell.

"Hallo! what's the matter here?" asked the Panther, looking back.

The Swaggerer struggled to his feet, and looked back, expecting to see Jack, but the street was clear.

"Odd," he muttered, "I'll swear I heard a voice."

"Whose voice?" asked the Panther.

"There's only one voice that would trouble me," replied the Swaggerer.

"And it was strong enough to knock you down," sneered the Panther.

"I slipped and fell," returned the Swaggerer, angrily; "you are mighty clever and bold, Panther, but I should like to see you when your turn comes to die."

"You are in your second childhood," said the Panther; "first Sneezer sees him, then the Pantaloon, and now you hear him. I believe it is a case of funk all round."

"Believe what you like," muttered the Swaggerer; "but your time will come."

"How could I be mistaken?" asked the Pantaloon. "Could I give myself only seven days to live? Seven days—a week is nothing!"

"Come back to Jibber's," said the Panther, "and hurry up all of you. We will see what he has to say to it."

"And don't waste time by going a roundabout way," said the Swaggerer, gloomily; "it's a waste of time."

With many a glance back, on the part of three at least, they returned to Jibber's, and found him sitting alone in the back room where they left him.

The bar was, of course, closed for the night, and the rest of his associates had gone to their several places of rest.

"Wal," he said, "what news?"

"We've found him," replied the Swaggerer, "or rather he's found us. He haunted us this night."

"Indeed!" said Makepeace Jibber, slowly, "and what's he done?"

They told him what had passed, and he listened attentively. When they finished, he emptied his glass.

"I'll speak true," he said, "because I've got truth in me, and I'll tell you what I think of your case, Mister Pantaloon."

"Aye, do," said the old man, hoping to get from him a ray of comfort and hope.

"In my opinion," said Jibber, deliberately, "you are as good as done for."

"Don't say that!" cried the Pantaloon.

"But I do say it," said Jibber. "You've got seven days to live, and no more. But still I say, don't cave in."

"What would you do were you in my place?" asked the shivering Pantaloon.

"I'd have a run for it," said Jibber. "Trust in me. I'll start in the morning, and I'll take you four with me. The rest can follow on, they know the appointed spot."

"If I could but get clear away," muttered the Pantaloon.

"We'll have a try for it," said Jibber, cheerfully. "You can't do more than run for it. It's life or death for you."

The Pantaloon's face grew ghastly white with terror.

"He must come for you, Pantaloon, if we all stick together," said the Panther, "and if we watch for him on the day he named, surely there are enough of us to settle him."

"He takes us unawares," said the Swaggerer, with a gloomy face.

"Then we must not be taken unawares."

"Talking of being taken unawares, reminds me," said Makepeace Jibber, "this boss of yours was here to-night."

"Here!" they exclaimed.

"Yes, popped in a minute before you came," said Jibber, coolly; "he opened the door and walked in as if the place belonged to him. 'Sit still,' he said; 'I'm not come to harm you,' and then he looked round as if for a friend."

"Why didn't you shoot him down?" demanded the Panther.

"That's your business, my friend," said Jibber; "he's no enemy of mine, and shooting down in New York is risky. If it had been out in Nevada, I don't know that I mightn't have put a friendly bullet into him."

"Well, having looked round, what did he do?"

"Nodded, and walked out again."

"He's more than mortal," groaned Sneezer.

"You've said that before," muttered the Swaggerer, "and if you can't find something new to say, keep quiet."

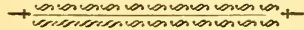
"Well, my hearties," said Makepeace Jibber, rising, "it's time we went to snooze. You know your room, and I know mine. You have three hours before you."

He nodded to them, looked at his revolvers, and sauntered out of the room.

The moment the door was between them, his face was on the broad grin.

"Durn me," he said, "if ever I see four men so skeered by a boy. They'll believe anything. 'Jest looked in to see if they was there,' I says—and they all believe it. Durn me! I'm a man of truth, but I must tell a lie now and then to keep on a level with most people. Skeered they were, truly. Ha, ha!"

And with his grin getting broader and broader, he went to bed; first placing his revolver under his pillow.



CHAPTER XXXI.

IN IOWA—THE LONELY HUT—A KIND RECEPTION, AND A DASTARDLY CRIME.

THREE days later, Makepeace Jibber, and the Swaggerer and his gang were out upon the plains south of Iowa.

The railway had helped them so far, and the rest they were going to do on foot.

"Unless we should find horses," said Jibber, "and then we'll ride."

An apparently uninhabited country lay before them, and the Panther made an observation upon it. But Jibber put him at rest.

"Be easy," he said, "there's people and plenty ahead of us. More than I think is good. All America will be located and filled up before long."

They carried knapsacks containing ammunition, and rifles, revolvers, and bowie-knives. Their food they had to find during the day.

The Pantaloone had groaned as the train rattled along, for it never went fast enough for him, but now that he was clear upon the plain, he breathed with more freedom.

"He can't have followed us," he said.

"No, old gibbet," said Makepeace Jibber, giving him a playful dig in the ribs. "He reckoned on your stopping in the old spot. But we've done him."

"It makes me savage," growled the Panther, "to think that we can't stand and face him."

"It does look sneaking like," said Jibber; "but sneaking, after all, is a matter of taste. Some like it, and some don't."

He was their guide, and professed to know the country. After leading the way over a semi-barren plain of half-a-score miles, he brought them to a pretty stretch of rich land.

"Here," he said, "is land enough for half a nation, but I don't think half-a-dozen men are squatted on it."

"There's a hut yonder," said the Swaggerer, pointing to a wooden structure half concealed by a grove of trees.

"We'll put up there for the night," said Jibber, coolly.

"You know the owner?"

"No, I don't; I ain't been here for three years, and there's sure to have been a change."

"Why—was it an old man, then?"

"Old or young, it's the same: a new party comes up, and if he's strong enough he takes, if he isn't he goes on farther."

There was a significance in these words that made the Swaggerer shudder.

"Is it such a terrible country?" he asked.

"That and nothing less," was the reply.

They went up to the hut in a body, and Makepeace Jibber knocked at the door.

After a short delay, it was opened, and a tall, powerfully-built man stood before them.

"Wal," he said, "what now?"

"We have come to put up for the

night," replied Jibber, keeping an eye on every movement of the man.

"In—deed!" said the other. "Wal, I've no room for you."

"But we must come in," urged Jibber.

"No, you don't," was the cool reply. "There's a place two miles up where you can do as you like. It's owned by a man who's just lost all—his wife and children—with fever, and he won't fight."

"And you will?" said Jibber.

"Wal, I'll try, unless you make tracks," was the reply.

"Then I think I'll go to the widower," said Jibber.

"Wise of you, if your life's worth keeping," said the man, with a laugh, and closed the door.

"Talk of five being afraid of one," sneered the Panther. "I wonder what this is?"

"You darned fool," said Jibber, "where were your eyes?"

"In my head, I suppose."

"Then take 'em out and use 'em next time. There were half-a-dozen others in the hut. I saw their rifles in the corner."

It was a long two miles before they came to another hut, but once there they found the man who had lost all he had.

He was seated by the door, staring at the expanse before him, and he paid no heed to their arrival until Jibber laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Who is it?" he said, looking up vacantly.

"Friends, who want shelter for the night."

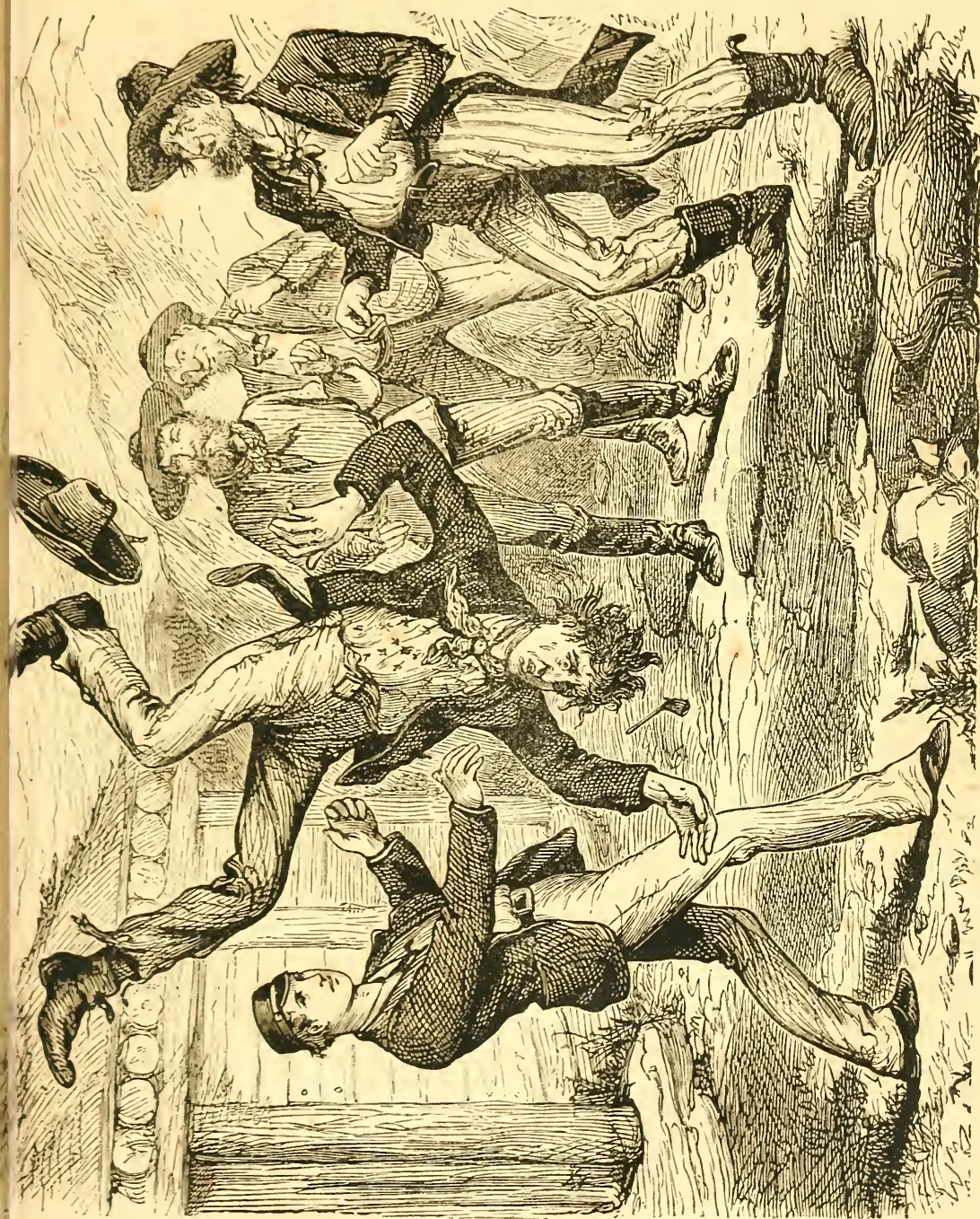
"Go in," he answered, "the house is yours."

It was a rough place, but some attempt had been made to furnish it comfortably, although there were signs of recent neglect, and the room had a disordered appearance.

Makepeace Jibber made himself very much at home. Having put some wood on the fire, and hung the kettle over it, he went into a back room to forage for food.

He speedily came back with some ham and bread, and a bottle of spirits.

While they were eating and drinking, the owner of the hut came in.



"ERE HE COULD REALISE WHAT HAD HAPPENED, BUNKS SAW HIS TOES IN THE AIR."

The man sat down by the fire. As he did not speak, the Swaggerer spoke to him.

"You've lost your little ones?" he said.

"Children and wife," the man answered, "and it comes hard just as we were going to leave this lonely life, and live down town."

"Had enough of it?" the Panther said.

"Enough and more than enough," he replied, "but I've done well here, and made money."

"And banked it, I'll be bound," said Makepeace Jibber, facetiously.

"No, no," said the man, absently; "I know nothing about banks."

He turned a little away as if he did not wish to talk, and the others went on with their meal.

They ceased to converse, but Jibber, the Swaggerer, and the Panther exchanged glances of significance, and occasionally looked at the silent man by the fire.

They finished eating, and drew up to the fire to smoke, their host making way for them. He drew back into the shadow.

"Don't go there," said Jibber; "we ain't the people to drive a man from his own fireside."

"I'd rather be here," he said, simply, and they let him be.

"Where shall we sleep?" they asked him, after a time.

"Here," he said, "you will find it warmer."

He went out and fetched them some rugs and blankets, and then disappeared.

"Our friend's gone," said Jibber, "and we can make ourselves comfortable."

They arranged the blankets round the fire, and put on more wood, then lay down to sleep.

After a time the Sneezer was sound asleep, and old Pipstone, the Pantaloon, appeared to be so. Then Jibber opened his eyes, and softly raised himself.

"Hist!" he said, and then the Swaggerer and the Panther rose, too.

"You heard what he said?" hoarsely whispered Jibber.

"Yes," they answered.

"He's got his money here, and it's no use to him."

"Not a bit," said the Swaggerer.

"He'll pine away, and some stranger will come and find it."

"That's true," assented the Panther.

"Why, then, shouldn't we have it?"

They looked at him, breathing hard. He was a man of strong nerves, and stood their stare steadily.

"It's done in a moment," he said, "and there is a big burying-ground outside. When the money is found, a bit of fire will burn out the signs of it."

"It will be thought that he did it himself," said the Swaggerer.

"Just so. Then the question is: who is to do it?"

Blood-stained and black-hearted as they were, it was not without hesitation that they gave their full assent to the murderous proposition.

"Is there no other way?" asked the Swaggerer.

"No," said Jibber, shaking his head. "Bare robbery is a fool's trick. Either complete the business, or leave it alone. He must have made a pile of money to talk of living down town."

"And we came for money," said the Swaggerer.

"So why not do it?" said Jibber. "Let us toss for it? Odd man out."

"No," replied the Panther, "we'll all three be in it. I'll see what he is doing."

He crept out of the room, and was absent about ten minutes. He came back as stealthily as he left.

"He's kneeling by his bedside," he said, "praying."

"Having his back to us," said Jibber, rising, "he's handy. Come on!"

The Swaggerer was ghastly pale, but he rose also, and they all went out. The moment they disappeared, the Pantaloon sat up.

"More blood — more blood!" he moaned, rocking himself to and fro. "I've lived in it, and I shall die in it."

"What's the matter?" asked the Sneezer, starting from his sleep; "where are the others?"

"Can't you guess?" said the Pantaloon, with a wild stare; "didn't you hear that poor devil talking about his money?"

"I didn't notice anything."

"He said very little, but it was

enough. They know he's got dollars here, and they mean to have them."

"Well," said the Sneezer, "robbery is only a sort of exchange."

"It's more than that," said the Pantaloon. "But you are a dunder-headed fool. Harken to that!"

A cry of surprise.

A sound of struggling.

A shriek for help, and a fall.

"Its done," said the Pantaloon, clasp-
ing his hands. "Oh, what a horrible
life is this; and I have but three days
to live!"

"You must not talk in that way,"
said Sneezer, shaking terribly. "It—
it's a—a—all in our trade; and you've
got aw—a—a—away from our enemy."

"I have not," said the Pantaloon. "I
feel that he is on my trail. I must die;

but meanwhile I must live in such
scenes as this. I'll not do it. I can't
do it—I must steal away to some lone
place, and repent—"

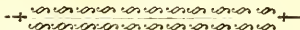
"Hush! lie down!" hissed the
Sneezer; "they are coming back."

They both lay down, and feigned to
be asleep. The others came in a moment
afterwards, Makepeace Jibber foremost.

He was engaged in wiping his bowie-
knife upon his sleeve, and, glancing at
the pair of supposed sleepers, said—

"This last job is between us three.
Whatever we find we share. These
two are not in it.

"I don't know that I oughtn't to
have fully half," continued Jibber,
slowly, "seeing that I've done more
than half the work. But there, I'll not
be mean. Share and share alike."



CHAPTER XXXII.

THE NEXT DAY—THE PANTALOOON MAKES A RESOLVE, AND CARRIES IT OUT.

THERE was no more sleep for anybody
that night.

After a few minutes, the Pantaloon
and Sneezer awoke as naturally as they
could, and a conversation on the future
ensued.

No reference was made to the hospi-
tality of the owner of the hut.

That subject was avoided, as well it
might be.

Stark and dead lay the poor fellow in
the room where the three monsters in
human form had slain him.

Perhaps he cared little for life when
he had lost all that was dear to him, but
that does not lessen the atrocity of the
deed.

"I don't think we will stop here to
breakfast," said the Swaggerer, just as
the dawn became visible through the
window.

"Just as well not to trouble people—
ahem!—too much," said Makepeace
Jibber. "There's a bit of table-land
about a mile farther, where I vote we
stop a bit."

The Sneezer and Pantaloon were sent
forward to make a fire and prepare
breakfast, Jibber describing a spot near
a grove of trees which he thought was
suitable.

"What are they going to do?"
asked the Pantaloon, as the pair left the
hut.

"Search the crib for the coin," replied
Sneezer, "and then burn it, I guess."

"And will they burn him, too?"
asked the Pantaloon, shuddering.

"You bet that's their notion," replied
the Sneezer.

"Awful!" was all the wretched old
man said.

With leaden steps he walked beside
his companion until they reached the
spot described by Jibber. There was
no difficulty in finding it.

It lay on the summit of a slope, and
commanded a view of the valley beneath.

"We had better make the fire," said
Sneezer, pointing to a small hollow.

"You can make it," replied the
Pantaloon. "I'll have nothing more to
do with them."

"We shall see about that when they
come up," said the Sneezer, surlily.
"You always were a good hand in
shirking work. Look here, I'm
jiggered if I do it unless you help me."

"Then leave it alone," was the Panta-
loon's answer.

He sat down, resting his face on his
hands, his elbows on his knees, and his

eyes fixed on the hut that lay like a toy below.

Sneezer, after hesitating a bit and making another appeal to him about going on, was obliged to collect the sticks, and make a fire without assistance.

He grumbled a good deal while he worked, and said some very bitter things, but he talked to ears that were deaf.

The Pantaloon was not thinking of him.

His mind was rehearsing the events of the night—the culminating time of horror in his dark and terrible life.

He called back the face of the sorrow-stricken man who bade them welcome and gave them shelter, and cursed his murderers as savages.

But he cursed because he had a dread of the fate in store for him.

If the shadow of Jack had been lifted up from his heart, he would have been as bad as ever.

A vile, wicked old man was the Pantaloon, a brute by instinct, but a coward at heart.

Ere long he saw three men come out of the hut, and knew that they were his companions.

They walked a little way, and stopped.

"What now?" he asked himself, and the answer came from the hut as the flames leaped forth, and a column of smoke rose straight in the still air.

"The finish," he muttered, and the three men moving on again, he rose to his feet.

"Sneezer," he said, "I'm going."

"Going where?" asked the other.

"Away—I can't rest here," said the Pantaloon. "I couldn't be another hour with them yonder."

"You've grown mighty particular all of a sudden," said the Sneezer, blowing at the fire to make it burn; "but you know best, of course."

"It is my only hope," said the Pantaloon. "There's a big wood yonder, and I'll go and hide in that until the seven days are over; then, if I'm spared, I'll follow on."

"But you will want something to eat," said the Sneezer; "you can't live on grass."

"I've a couple of ship's biscuits in my pocket," replied the Pantaloon;

"but I doubt if I shall touch them until my time has come and gone."

"It's a horrible thing," said the Sneezer, shivering; "but perhaps, after all, you fancied you met him."

"Was it fancy on your part?"

"No; I saw him right enough."

"So did I, and heard him. There's no fancy in the business, I wish there was."

"But then again he may be bragging."

"Did he brag before you, Sneezer?"

"No; but then again we may have got clear of him."

"Ah, just so," said the Pantaloon, with a weary look ahead; "we may, but then you see we mayn't. It is possible for him to be within a few yards of us at this moment."

"Great heaven! don't talk like that," exclaimed the Sneezer, looking about him apprehensively. "I—I—atchew! Oh, dear me! if I thought that—atchew—atchew!"

"Well, Sneezer," said the Pantaloon, "they are coming up, and I must get on. I feel that you and I won't meet again; but I don't see that we need howl like a couple of women over it."

"It's the horrible way of parting that does me up," said the Sneezer. "Now, if you were going to die a natural death—"

"What do you call a natural death for such as you and me?" interposed the Pantaloon. "Isn't it something in the way of a rope, and a parson, and a bell tolling?"

"I suppose it is," replied the Sneezer, with a face of saffron-colour; "but it isn't a thing to talk about."

"I've done with it," said the Pantaloon. "Good-bye."

"I think, if you don't mind," said the Sneezer, hesitating, "that we will shake hands."

The Pantaloon put out his, and their hands met.

There was no warmth in the grasp, but the Sneezer was as gentle as if he were touching the hand of a dying man.

Then the Pantaloon left him, and hurried away to the forest.

Not once did he look back, although ere long he heard faint shouts after him.

On reaching the wood, he plunged in and hurried on until he reached a spot

where the foliage was so dense that bright noon only made twilight among the trees.

There he lay down, shivering like a wild beast in its lair.

The dread of death which we all have, boast and brag as we may, was upon him with tenfold force. The thought of the Great Unknown beyond the grave appalled him.

The coward dies a thousand deaths, and the wretched old man was doomed to die ten thousand.

All that day he lay, and scarcely stirred.

The woods were still, almost as still as the grave itself.

No wind was stirring outside, and in that dense spot no song-bird ever piped to its mate. The stealthy rustle of small animals and creeping things alone broke the stillness.

Night came on, and the darkness descended like a curtain. He covered close, and covered his face with his hands.

"But why should I fear it?" he asked himself. "It is my friend. It hides me from him."

He drew his hands away, and saw a sight that caused him to leap to his feet with amazement and terror.

The wood was illuminated by ten thousand little lamps moving about.

Who was it—fairies, hobgoblins, or what?

Then in a moment he remembered having heard of fireflies.

And these were the famous fireflies of America without a doubt.

They buzzed about him, and lit upon the trees and ground, disporting them-

selves until some signal from their leaders drew them away.

He saw them dance into the distance, and night, black as the centre of the Great Pyramid, was upon him again.

He crept to a tree and lay down, and, strange to say, by-and-by he slept.

When he awoke, it was light again, and, rising, he walked on slowly through the wood.

The dread of the day before was on him again.

Nervously he glanced about him.

Every slight sound seemed to speak of the coming of Jack.

"This is the fifth day," he thought. "I have to-morrow, and then—"

He shuddered, and, leaning against the trunk of a tree, wiped the perspiration from his brow.

All that day he ate nothing. Sometimes he went on, sometimes he stopped, and occasionally he retraced his steps, as if to seek his companions again.

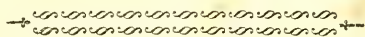
At night he lay down and slept again.

It was not so strange, after all, for do not condemned men sleep with the noise of the scaffold-building in their ears?

The sixth day came, and he had fasted thirty-six hours. Hunger assailed him, and he ate one of the ship-biscuits he had brought with him.

Then he rehearsed the action of the day before, a little forward and a little backward, with long rests between.

The last night came, and he lay down to sleep, and did not woo the goddess in vain. Slumber closed his eyelids, and kept them sealed until the seventh day had come and was far advanced.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SEVENTH DAY—THE LAST FLIGHT FOR LIFE, AND THE END OF IT.

THE seventh day.

He stood up as he awoke, stretched himself, yawned, and wondered, in the half-unconsciousness that comes with waking from a dead sleep, why he was alone.

Then the awful truth flashed upon him.

This was the day the enemy had appointed for him to die.

But was it really his last?

Here he was alone in a solitary wood hundreds of miles from the spot where Jack had passed sentence upon him.

How was that sentence to be executed?

He looked around him, and closely scanned the wood. It was a more open spot than where he first rested, and the daylight shone brightly around him.

The sun, a third of its course run, was visible above the tree-tops.

"The day is partly gone," he murmured, "and he is not here."

He gathered a little hope, but not much, to his heart, and moved on.

This day he was resolved he would have no vacillating—he would keep on right ahead.

For hours he walked through the forest, and every stride gave him a little more hope. He became quite strong in the belief that he was free of his enemy.

On, on through the livelong day, only pausing to drink now and then at a bubbling spring—on, on, till sunset, when he came to an end of the wood, and of the table-land also.

The trees grew to the very verge of a precipice that went down two hundred feet like a wall.

Below him stretched a fertile plain. He could see men and cattle moving about, the sun brilliantly setting in the west.

He saw and longed to join the moving life below, for he felt that he lived again.

"The day is passed," he said, "and he is not here."

"The sun will not set for some minutes yet," said a voice behind him.

A spasm of terror shot through his frame, and he swung rather than turned round to face the implacable avenger.

There was Jack, almost as worn and haggard as himself, with the seal of a deadly fatigue upon him, but strong in his purpose.

"You thought you had escaped," he cried; "it was a wild hope. From the time I passed upon your sentence, I have hovered near you."

"Hovered near me!" said the old man, and his voice sounded like a distant echo of Jack's.

"For scarce an hour," was the rejoinder, "even as you slept, here in this wood, I have not been far away. I slept, too, a little, but your lightest movement roused me, and now here we are alone. The sun will be down in a minute. Have you anything to say to me?"

"Mercy!" gasped the old man.

"Do not waste your breath in asking for that," replied Jack; "I am as implacable as the law itself."

"If I might live another day."

"Not another hour, unless you slay me. In fair fight, as I have done before, I give you a chance for your life."

"I have no chance," said the old man; "you know that, and I will not fight."

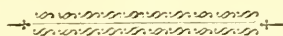
He turned round to flee, forgetful of the precipice, and saw it when too late.

Jack sprang forward to grasp him, the act was instinctive, but the old man was gone.

A wild shriek escaped his lips, ringing far away, and headlong he fell to the plain.

Jack looked over, and saw him strike the ground. Two seconds later the sound reached his ears.

At the same moment the sun dipped and twilight fell upon the earth.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

BY THE CAMP-FIRE—A LITTLE BOASTFULNESS—ANOTHER OF THE SEVEN DOOMED.

"THE Pantaloon was a fool to leave us," said the Swaggerer, with his most grandiose air; "but of course it was a case of funk."

A camp-fire was burning brightly, and he and the Panther, the Sneezer, and Makepeace Jibber lay around it.

The appointed spot had been reached, and on the night that followed the seventh day they were awaiting the arrival of the rest of Jibber's gang.

And where was that appointed spot?

At the base of the table-land on the plain, and within a mile of them lay the body of the Pantaloon.

But they knew it not.

They had seen and heard nothing of the grim tragedy, so brief and terrible, that had been enacted one hour before.

"He must have been a fool to step it," continued the Swaggerer, pressing down the tobacco in his pipe with his little finger, and shaking out the ash, "for what harm could come to him?"

"Even if that boy," said Jibber, "who seems to me to be what holy water is to the devil, had followed us up."

"Followed us up," exclaimed the Panther. "Bosh!"

"I don't know," said the Sneezer, who, whenever Jack was the subject of conversation, had a tingling sensation in his nose. "He could have followed us if he liked."

"How do you know that, old pumpkin-head?" asked the Swaggerer.

"I don't know it in an ordinary way," replied the Sneezer; "I feel it."

"You would feel something else," said the Panther, "if you were near enough for me to give you a taste of my boot."

"But it really do appear to me," said Jibber, "that you are all in a most eternal catamounterous funk about that boy."

"Nothing of the sort," said the Swaggerer, indignantly. "What do you think we are made of?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet," replied Jibber, coolly. "I'm thinking about it."

"You have not found us funk work," said the Panther, with a meaning look.

"Not at all," replied the other, "but it is different killing other people to being killed yourself."

"Well, don't you think so, too?" demanded the Swaggerer.

"No doubt. I'm but a mortal man myself," replied Jibber; "but I am a man, and was never afraid of a boy yet."

"He isn't a boy," muttered the Sneezer; "you don't know him. He's a—atchew!—atchew!—atchew!"

"Oh, is he? That's a rum thing for him to be."

"I was going to say that he was a—atchew!—a—atchew!"

"Oh, dry up!" said the Panther, taking up one of the burning sticks and throwing it viciously at his head.

Fortunately it struck the Sneezer on the body, and for a moment he was hidden by a mass of sparks and smoke.

"If you make that row," said Jibber, "you'll have the prairie wolves down on us; they'll think a jackass is dying, and they do like jackass bones to pick."

"Let us change the subject," said the Swaggerer. "How long shall we have to wait here, Jibber?"

"Might be only a few hours," he answered, "may be a day, or may be a week. My boys have to come cautiously, for they're known about the States."

"They're a nice lot."

"Cheery boys, never shirk work, and always do it pleasantly."

"Excuse me," interrupted the Sneezer, "but I think I hear somebody coming this way."

"It's your grandmother," grunted the Panther. "I hear nothing."

"He is right," said Jibber, listening.

"There is somebody coming this way. Who goes there? Stop, or I'll slip a bullet, and it may come too near you."

"Raise your hand an inch," said a stern voice, "and you are a dead man."

Then out of the gloom there came a figure familiar to three of them, and strange to one.

But Makepeace Jibber guessed who it was.

Jack, pale and almost spectre-like, but handsome and terrible withal, stood before them.

In each hand he carried a revolver, and his eyes took them all in.

"You did not expect to see me here," he said; "but I have kept my word. Your old comrade lies dead at the foot of the cliff. He refused, like a coward, to fight, and in flight met his well-merited and certain doom."

Jack paused, as if expecting one of them to speak, but they all kept still: the trio of Jack's enemies from fear, and Makepeace Jibber petrified with his sudden appearance, audacity, and coolness.

"I suppose you have sufficient thought for your old companion in rascality to bury him," Jack went on; "if you do not, he will be left to the birds and beasts of prey. Now mark me!"

There was little need for the injunction, they marked him well enough.

"Mark me, you three," he continued; "in your turn your time shall come also. There is no escape. Keep together, and I will pick you out from each other in my own time. Separate, and I will unearth you from your hiding-places. But I shall tarry perhaps, and yet I may come to-morrow. I choose the hour and the place when it pleases me. On you I set my seal next."

He stepped forward, and just touched the temple of Walker Dribbles the Sneezer with the barrel of the revolver in his right hand, and the wretched coward, giving vent to a groan, fell back.

"When and where I please," said Jack, and coolly turning, as if he indeed were proof against all weapons, he strode away, and was lost in the darkness.

The Sneezer lay upon the earth, but for a slight movement of his lips, like one dead.

The others sat and stared at each other.

Makepeace Jibber broke the silence.

"Snakes!" he said.

And then they were all quiet again for a minute or more.

"Snakes!" exclaimed Makepeace Jibber again.

Another silence.

"Snakes!" he exclaimed, for the third time.

Walker Dribbles groaned.

"I suppose it was him?" said the Swaggerer.

"Of course it was," snarled the Panther. "Why didn't you let fly at him?"

"He had his eye on me, and I was covered."

"So was I; but you, Jibber, could have brought him down."

"Per—haps," said Jibber, deliberately; "but, you see, it wasn't my business. He didn't come for me. I'm not in this transaction. I am all right."

"Oh, ain't he selfish," grinned the Sneezer.

"Strikes me," said Jibber, "that there's a touch of that emotion about you. What are you howling about?"

"What am I howling about?" asked Sneezer, appealing to the others. "Hear him!"

"Oh, yes," hissed the Panther, "we hear you both. Look here, I'm tired of this game, and I vote we bring it to an end somehow."

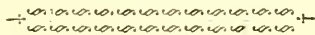
"Aye, but how?" said the Swaggerer.

"Change about—go on another tack," said the Panther. "He hunts us now, let us hunt him."

"Jibber," he went on, turning to that individual, "you have told me that you often take jobs at a price."

"Aye," was the answer, "I'm ready when there are dollars about. But you ain't got any—at least, not many."

"We've some," said the Panther, "and we may have more. We are going on a business that may be profitable, and I, for one, will sign for you to take two-thirds of my share if you will undertake to get rid of this imp of darkness who kills us off, like rabbits in a warren, just when he pleases."



CHAPTER XXXV.

A NOTABLE ARRANGEMENT—ARRIVAL OF THE GANG—THEIR FUTURE COGNOMEN.

"WAL, you see," said Jibber, lowering his voice, "it's a difficult job. It's like handling infernal machines that you don't know the make of."

"So you are afraid of him?" said the Panther, with savage scorn.

"I am a follower of prudence," replied Jibber, "and a lover of safe business."

"There's risk in everything you do," said the Panther, "and I don't see why you should not make this as safe as the rest."

"And I don't see why you don't make it safe for yourselves."

"I see," said the Swaggerer, "that you shirk the job. Let it be."

"Go easy," said Makepeace Jibber, calmly. "I've not said no yet, but I may say yes if you come to my terms."

"First of all," added Makepeace Jibber, "I'll have a look round."

He rose, and made a circle of some width round the fire.

Satisfied that nobody was near enough to overhear anything, he returned to his seat.

"Don't move," he said, "I'm going to speak low, but loud enough for you to hear. My terms are two months' work for nothing."

"That's a long time," said the Swaggerer.

"We shall be six months, it may be a year, out this way, and if you get over the first two months, you may reckon upon the other ten."

They consented to this with a nod.

"What you aimn," pursued Jibber, "you can't spend here."

"That's true."

"And if our young friend bowls you over, where will be the use of what you have? I'm a man of reason, and I'm reasonable. Two months for me, and the rest for yourselves, and, above all, freedom."

"What do you say?" the Swaggerer asked the Panther.

"It's fair enough," was the answer.

"And you, Sneezer?"

"I'm agreeable to serve anybody two years if my life is saved," replied Sneezer, "but I'm afraid, oh—atchew!—atchew!—atchew!"

"Cats on the tiles are nothing to him," said the Panther. "Well, Jibber, we say done."

"Hands on it, then."

He shook hands with them, and he furthermore sealed it with a little drop of good fiery whisky, that in case of emergency would have taken the place of turpentine, out of his own private flask, that held about a quart.

"Ask no questions," he said, "but leave all to me."

"Good. We consider it done."

"And now for a toss to see who takes first watch."

Makepeace Jibber took a coin from his pocket, and was about to spin it, when the Sneezer, who had resumed a sitting position, uttered an exclamation of horror.

"What's the row now?" asked the Panther.

"Look at that dollar," cried the Sneezer, "there's part of a man's life upon it!"

It was stained with blood, and Jibber, although not over-sensitive, shivered as he looked at it.

"It's one we took out of that fellow's pocket," he said.

His first intention was to clean it by rubbing it on the sleeve of his coat, but the thought that the stain would remain upon him caused him to desist.

"It's only a dollar, after all," he said, and threw it away behind him.

Taking another from his pocket, and finding it clean, he called on the others to spin with him.

Odd man out resulted in the first watch falling upon the Sneezer.

"Just as well," said the Panther, "for jelly-bag would not have slept a wink in any case."

"How long am I to watch?" asked the Sneezer.

"Until we wake up," replied Jibber, and there appeared to be sufficient humour in the observation to draw a laugh from the others.

The Sneezer had the pleasure of watching all night, and it was surely a foretaste of after punishment that he endured.

Even the snores of his companions, nothing out of the common way, appalled him, and every little sound around caused him to quake and groan with fear.

Perfect stillness is not to be found at any time in any place on earth.

In the house, large or small, there is the creaking of boards and stairs, the mysterious little clicks that tell of shifting and slowly-approaching decay.

On the plains there is the rustling footsteps of animals, in the woods the snapping of branches of trees.

Stillness, in its perfect form, is not to be found in sublunary life.

And then the forms he made out in the darkness!

Jack had said that he would return when he chose, and the fears of the Sneezer prompted him to ask himself: "Why may he not return to-night?"

This thought acting upon his disordered mind created the image of Jack a hundred times over, and the Sneezer saw him coming down upon him with vengeful eyes.

And as many times as fancy played him this trick, he fell upon his knees, and begged for mercy.

Even when he knew that it must be fancy, he knelt so as to be on the safe side in case of the off-chance of its being reality, and his sobs and groans would have awakened ordinary sleepers a score times or more.

Again he was troubled with visions of his old comrade, the Pantaloon.

He saw him lying dead a few yards away, and when this spectre melted into

nothing, he beheld him erect, gliding round and round the camp-fire with ghastly eyes, grim in death, staring at him.

His time had begun at last.

He dared not wake his comrades, and watched on, although it seemed to him as if eternal night had fallen upon the earth.

"The sun will never rise again," he said.

But at last the welcome flush eastward told him that the night was over, and with some sense of relief he made up the fire.

While he was thus engaged, Makepeace Jibber opened his eyes, yawned, and sleepily asked—

"Who's that moving about there?"

"Me," said the Sneezer, in an injured tone.

"What the deuce are you doing there?"

"Come, that's a good 'un," said the Sneezer, "after leaving me to watch all night."

"As I'm a sinner, that's so," said Jibber. "Wake up, my hearties."

A touch with his foot roused the others, and they got up, rubbing their arms, and stamping about to shake off the cold.

"He's been watching all night," said Makepeace Jibber, pointing to the gloomy Sneezer. "Isn't it greedy of him?"

"Confounded greedy," said the Swaggerer.

"So like him," said the Panther.

"Oh, you are a nice lot," said the Sneezer, "but you might be a little bit grateful."

"I'm anything, if I'm paid for it," said Jibber, "but nothing if there is no money coming in."

They partook of a breakfast consisting of biscuits and meat, and raw whisky, and being just daylight by that time, Jibber suggested that they should go over and see if the Pantaloon could be found.

This was agreed to, and without much searching they found him.

He lay at the foot of the cliff, doubled up like some automaton figure carelessly thrown aside.

Falling head first, he had broken his neck, and all his limbs had been dis-

located by the shock. Already some animal had been eating away part of the face.

"What shall we do with him?" asked Makepeace Jibber.

"Don't think I could touch him," replied the Swaggerer, with a sickening sensation at his heart; "he was not very lovely in life, but in death he is repulsive."

"Pull some long grass," said Jibber, "and cover him up. We'll put a cairn over him."

There were plenty of stones about, and they erected over him a hill of stones that would defy the efforts of such animals as were thereabouts. On a tree near they cut his initials and left him.

"Phew!" said the Swaggerer, as he walked away, "I don't like attending funerals, and never did."

"Especially when they are the fore-runners of your own," said Jibber.

The gibe was not particularly relished, and there were signs of ill-humour apparent when they returned to the camp-fire.

As the day was now warm, and it was not needed, the Sneezer was directed just to keep it going, so as to save re-lighting by-and-by.

At noon the watcher of the night fell asleep, and when he awoke he found a considerable addition to the company had arrived.

All the rest of the gang had come in, and the united force now numbered sixteen, a set of ruffians without a redeeming quality among them.

Makepeace, standing on a huge stone, was making a speech, and the Sneezer awoke to hear the pith of it.

"All together," he was saying, "sink or swim, live or die, and the man who attempts to leave us or betray us forfeits his life."

A murmur of assent arose from the group, and Jibber proceeded to emphasize the threat conveyed in the last few words.

"And not only die," he said, "but die a death that those who witness it are not likely to forget. I'm a marcful man when things go easy, but when it's rough I rile up, and then there's not much to stick at."

"We know," they shouted; "bully,

old boss. You are the boy that's ready, real grit you are."

"And now, lads," said Jibber, "we must have a name. We must call ourselves something. What shall it be?"

Then ensued a discussion. All had a name, and everybody objected to all the names but their own. Finally Jibber settled it.

"Lads," he said, "we will call ourselves the Bowie Boys. It's short and pat, comes ready to the tongue, and will soon be heard of."

"That will do," said one, and finally so said they all.

"And when we've done a bit of

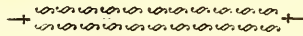
work," he concluded, "we'll put our mark on it, 'Done by the Bowie Boys,' and our line will be to keep out of sight. In business every man must mask his phiz."

"Hear, hear!" they shouted.

"It's safer," said the Swaggerer, and Makepeace Jibber, descending from his perch, bade them make a merry night of it.

They had brought a lot of drink with them, and what they called a merry night followed.

But it was of the coarsest revelry, and the air reeked with the bitterness and blasphemy of their tongues.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

MAPLE MOUNTAIN—UNEXPECTED LODGERS—A CHALLENGE AND ACCEPTANCE.

MAPLETOWN would have been called a village in England, but the Yankees always look ahead, and think of possibilities, and it was possible that the cluster of huts designated as above might one day become great and thriving.

It was situated half-way up Maple Mountain, and the inhabitants were sugar-makers — maple-trees abounded, and the sap from them made the sugar.

They were a quiet, simple people, but they were Yankees, and made money in any way that offered.

And up in Mapletown, one of them named Jerek Grittle let apartments.

He had no original intention of doing so, nor had any of his neighbours dreamt of doing such a thing, and it came about this way.

One morning he was going round for his buckets of sap, run from the trees through a tap inserted in the lower part of the trunk, when he came across three strangers.

One was an elderly man, the second a man of middle-age, and the third a handsome youth.

Old Ben, Jacob Sturmby, and Jack, of course.

Now, strangers were rare up Maple Mountain way, and Jerek Grittle had conversational gifts which he exercised whenever opportunity offered.

"Hullo!" he said, pausing, and put-

ting down his buckets, "whar do you come from, strangers?"

"We are Englishmen, travelling," said Jacob Sturmby.

"Sakes, now," exclaimed Jerek, "and travelled you have, to come all this way."

"We want to stop and rest here for a while," said Sturmby.

"Wal, I reckon you can rest a bit," replied Jerek.

"We don't mean that," said Jack.

"I want to buy, hire, or build a hut."

"To buy, hire, or build a hut!" Jerek Grittle repeated. "Sakes, now! Do you? Wal, having done one or t'other, what then?"

"We shall live in it, of course."

"And, living, you will do something?"

"Rest, I tell you," said Jack, impatiently. "I want rest."

"He isn't well," said Jacob, in an undertone, "and we thought that the mountain air would do him good."

"The mountain air is pe-cu-li-ar," said Grittle. "It don't suit everybody, and everybody don't suit us."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"We had a party come up here on the same hill," said Jerek. "His name is Slideaway Bunks, and his son came with him. They are here still, and they make sugar, darn 'em! They cut down the trade, they did."

"Confound your trade," interposed Jack, angrily. "What I want I can pay for—board and shelter. We can hunt here, I suppose?"

"You can," said Jerek, slowly. "Now, I know a party who would take you in for forty dollars down, and say nothing till the dollars are used up in board—say at twenty a week."

"I'll not bargain with you," said Jack. "Here is the money."

"Sakes, now!" said Jerek, "so it is, and I'm the man."

He took them to his bachelor home, which was very primitive in its architecture and domestic arrangements, being merely a log hut, sparsely furnished; but it was roomy, and Jack said it would do.

It was arranged that the place should be divided in two parts, and, with the exception of a few things, the newcomers provided for themselves.

Jerek's lean and lank frame quivered with merriment over the easy and advantageous bargain he had made.

What he proposed had been acceded to without a murmur.

"But it's like the sons of the rotten old mother country," he said; "they are not cute."

This was a slight error on his part. We can be as smart as any Yankee, any day, and be honest with it, which is a virtue not too much in use in the new country.

Jack and his friends had their rough rooms, one in front, looking down the mountain and over the plain, and the others at the back.

The latter were to be the sleeping-places.

On taking possession, Jack sat down by the window on a rough bench, and looked out upon this glorious view, stretching down the mountain and over thirty miles of the level plain.

A narrow and slightly winding track ran across the latter, and looked like a silver thread under his eyes.

It was the overland route from California to the States.

Then it was a mere track, but during the last few years a railway has been run over it.

But we deal with a little time ago, when that railway was only thought of.

Jack Sturmby and old Ben bustled

about, and did their best to give an air of comfort to the room; then dusted and arranged the few pieces of rude furniture, and lit a fire on the hearth, for it was cold.

Winter was at hand, and already they had had a slight snowfall on the mountain.

"There, dear lad," Jacob Sturmby said, pausing in his labours, "we have done our best."

"You are very kind," replied Jack, without looking round; "you always are."

"But won't you come to the fire, lad?"

Jack got up like one who mechanically obeys, and walked to the fire. He stood for a few moments warming his hands, then sat down on a chair Ben brought to him.

"You are too anxious about me," he said. "I ail nothing."

"You would not admit it if you did," said Jacob Sturmby.

"I tell you," said Jack, "that I have simply overtaxed myself, and need rest. Think of the long days and restless nights I have had—ever watchful."

"True, and you could have shot the old skunk a hundred times."

"I gave him seven days, and it was my humour to let him live so long. No less and no more. I was as weak as a child when I came up with him. In a struggle I should have had no chance."

"And yet pluck carried the day," said Sturmby, admiringly.

"My boy had pluck," murmured old Ben, "but it was not like yours, Master Jack."

"Poor boy!" said Jack, softly.

After awhile, he expressed a desire to be alone, and the two men left him.

Old Ben went into one of the back rooms, and busied himself with cleaning the weapons they had brought with them.

He had the trapper's love for such things, and they were left to his care. He kept everything in perfect condition, it is almost needless to say.

Jacob Sturmby sauntered out to take a look round the place, and form an opinion of the people he had come among.

An opportunity to reckon up some of them was immediately offered him.

Jerek Grittle was close by talking to two men of the unmistakable Yankee type.

One was fifty, the other twenty, both men six feet high, with hands and feet of enormous size. The younger man was especially favoured in this respect.

They all three saw Jacob as soon as he saw them, and lounged towards him with the familiar ease of their breed.

"Stranger," said Jerek, "pause a bit. Here are two friends and neighbours who would be glad to make your acquaintance."

"Very pleased, I'm sure," said Jacob.

"Your name," said Jerek, "is, I believe, Brown."

"No, it isn't," was the reply; "my name is Jacob Sturmby."

"I thought so," said Jerek Grittle, complacently, satisfied with having drawn it from him. "These neighbours of mine are father and son—Slideaway Bunks, senior, and Slideaway Bunks, junior."

"Glad to see you, sir," they said, and each extended a long paw.

Jacob shook hands, thinking it wise to be on good terms with all just then, and was moving off when Slideaway Bunks, junior, called him back.

"Mr. Jacob Sturmby," he said.

"Sir to you," replied Jacob.

"You have a young friend with you, I believe?"

"I have."

"He is tall, friend Grittle says."

"Friend Grittle has told the truth."

"And he is from the little island across the pond."

"He is English," was the reply.

"So, then, he can wrastle?" said Slideaway Bunks, junior.

"He may be able, but I don't know."

"Perhaps it is con-ve-ni-ent for you not to know?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Jacob.

"He may not wish to wrastle," drawled Slideaway, junior. "He may not care to meet a son of this vigorous country."

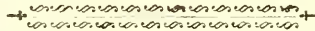
"He could not do so just now," said Jacob, "he is in ill health."

"Bad health is con-ve-ni-ent, too, sometimes," said Slideaway, junior, with a low chuckle.

"Why, you mutton-headed fool," cried Jacob, "what do you mean?"

"Sturmby," said a quiet voice behind him, "do not quarrel with him. If this gentleman is really anxious to wrestle, I will oblige him."

And turning, Jacob Sturmby saw to his amazement and alarm that it was Jack.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

SLIDEAWAY, JUNIOR, HAS A WRESTLING TREAT—THE WOUNDED MAN—WORK OF THE BOWIE BOYS.

"DEAR lad," said Jacob Sturmby, in an undertone, "why have anything to do with such a brute? There's no honour or glory in it; you might as well have a fight with a young buffalo."

"It is not my desire," replied Jack, "but I overheard what he said, and I know that I shall get no peace or rest until I have a bout with him."

"But how will it end, dear lad?"

"I don't know, Jacob; I trust more to skill than strength just now."

"Slidey, my son," said Slideaway Bunks, senior, "that 'ere British youngster looks the sort to cut and come again."

"He won't come again with me, I'll bet," replied Slideaway, junior.

"Slidey," said the old man, anxiously, "don't be extravagant; we don't often get a treat up here, and I want you to make the most of him. Don't waste the Britisher, but save a bit of him for another time."

"I ain't got to bu'st him outright, then, daddy?"

"No, Slidey, only shake him up a bit, and lay him up for a week or so."

"All right, daddy."

Advancing with a stilt-like motion of his legs, he asked Jack if he was ready.

"At your service," replied Jack. "What are your rules of wrestling here?"

"We have no rules," interposed

Slideaway Bunks, senior, hastily ; "every man wrestles as he pleases."

"Very good," said Jack, "then lay hold."

Slideaway, junior, slowly wound his arms around Jack with something of the action of a lazy boa-constrictor winding itself about a tree, and the next moment he felt his heels fly from under him.

Ere he could realise what had happened to his feet, Bunks saw his toes in the air, and simultaneously he got such a knock on the back of his head, as an angry knight with a mace would have given the gate of a belligerent castle.

"Sakes !" exclaimed Jerek Grittle ; "only see !"

Slideaway Bunks saw, but at first refused to believe.

"Is that my Slidey on the ground ?" he asked, wildly.

"It is him, no less," replied Jerek Grittle.

"On his back ?" cried the parent, aghast.

"At present," said Jerek, "he ain't on his belly."

"And thrown by a Britisher ?"

"He warn't chucked by no other party."

"Is one throw considered sufficient up here ?" said Jack, calmly.

"Young stranger," replied Jerek Grittle, "by the look of Slideaway, junior, he won't want another chuck afore tea."

Slideaway Bunks, senior, said nothing. He only looked at Jack, and breathed hard.

"If I am wanted again," said Jack to Jacob Sturmby, "call me."

And, with an unmoved air, he slowly sauntered into the house.

"Shall I help you to pick up young poplar ?" asked Jacob, addressing Slideaway, senior.

"But is it my Slidey ?" asked the old man, incredulously.

"It is his bodily person," replied Jerek Grittle, cutting himself a quid off a plug of tobacco.

"And put over by a Britisher ?"

"He warn't twisted up by an elephant," said Jerek.

"Daddy," said Slideaway Bunks,

junior, in a feeble voice, "where's the airthquake ? Have it moved on ?"

"Slidey," replied the old man, sorrowfully, "there warn't the durned scrapings of an airthquake in it. It's worse. You've been chucked by a Britisher."

Slideaway, junior, sat up and felt the back of his head.

"Daddy," he said, "get a bucket o' warm water and a plug of plaster for the hole he's made in my head. I'll have repairs done here."

"Can't you get up, Slidey ?"

"Not till the durned mountain have done spinning, daddy."

Bunks, senior, got a bucket of water and the plaster, and did the "repairs," while Jacob Sturmby and Jerek Grittle looked on.

Then young Slidey felt better, and got upon his feet.

"My young master," said Jacob, "wishes to know if this matter is settled ?"

"As far as I am consarned," replied Slideaway, junior, "it is settled considerably."

"You don't want any more ?"

"Not this side of a Christmas in midsummer, thanky."

Jacob was moving away when young Slideaway called him back.

"Stranger," he said, "if I knowed the trick of that throw, I'd heave over this 'ere mountain."

"No doubt you would," replied Jacob.

"Do you think the young Britisher would show me how it was done ?"

Jacob shook his head.

"He'll throw you again if you like," he said, "and you might be able to pick it up that way."

"I mightn't be able to pick myself up," returned Slideaway, junior, "so I'll go on with bu'sted ignorance. It's a pity that young chap ain't a native of these parts, Maple Mountain would be proud of him."

And ere the day had passed, Maple Mountain seemed inclined to make much of Jack.

Slideaway Bunks was the bully and terror of the place, and his defeat inspired in the hearts of the inhabitants an intoxicating joy.

Openly they condoled with young Slideaway over his broken head, and hoped "he would go in again."

"I may," he replied, "but not this sugar time. The game isn't sweet enough."

A few days later, winter came in earnest. The snow fell heavily in the night, and was followed by a hard frost.

Sap-gathering was stopped, and all the Maple Mountainites were idle.

It was their custom at such times to indulge in outdoor sports, such as running, leaping, and jumping with poles, but they were clumsy athletes at the best.

Jack was much better, and at the request of a deputation, headed by Jerek Grittle, that waited upon him, he came out to see the sports.

"And if you jine in them," said Jerek, "you'll take the rise out of most of us."

"I may compete in some of the things," Jack replied.

"Aye, do, lad," said Jacob Sturmby, encouragingly.

"It will do you a power of good, Master Jack," remarked old Ben.

They went out and found all the town there, gathered on a level shelf of land about two hundred yards long by a hundred broad.

Here the leaping-bar was stood, and the running-course marked out.

Jack's appearance was hailed with admiring murmurs, in which all joined but the two Bunks, who with scowling brows and set teeth, greeted his advance.

The first event was the quarter of a mile race, twice round the course.

It had been won by Slideaway Bunks, junior, two years in succession, thanks to his long legs.

Jack, after some pressing on the part of Jerek Grittle, entered, and won easily by thirty yards.

"Sakes!" exclaimed Jerek, "talk of the prairie-bird—he ain't in it!"

"I can't think that he is a Britisher," said Slideaway, senior.

"Anyhow, he's an infarnal crectur," replied his son.

The next event was putting the stone, and Jacob Sturmby entered for this. He won by a foot and a half.

"Hadn't we better all go to bed?" asked Slideaway Bunks, junior.

"The next event is the high jump," answered Jerek Grittle; "and for it are entered Brothers Cowpox Needle, Nehemiah Rachel Slinn, Winkle Craddath, and young Slideaway Bunks. Strangers," with a look at Jack, "are allowed by the Maple Mountain rules to enter."

But Jack's eyes were fixed upon a path almost obliterated by the snow that led from the plain. Up this a bare-headed man was staggering.

His fixed gaze drew all eyes in that direction, and the sports were stopped. Jack moved down to meet the man.

He was a stranger, of the digger class—that is, honest while it is rough. He had a terrible wound across his forehead, from which the blood was flowing.

Jack was just in time to catch him as he staggered and fell.

"Who has done this?" he asked.

"Carry me up somewhere," faintly replied the man. "I am the only one left alive."

Other help came near, and they bore him up to Jerek Grittle's house.

"To my room," said Jack.

And they carried him thither.

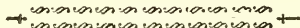
A little brandy was given him, and Jacob Sturmby, who had some slight knowledge of surgery, washed and bound up the wound.

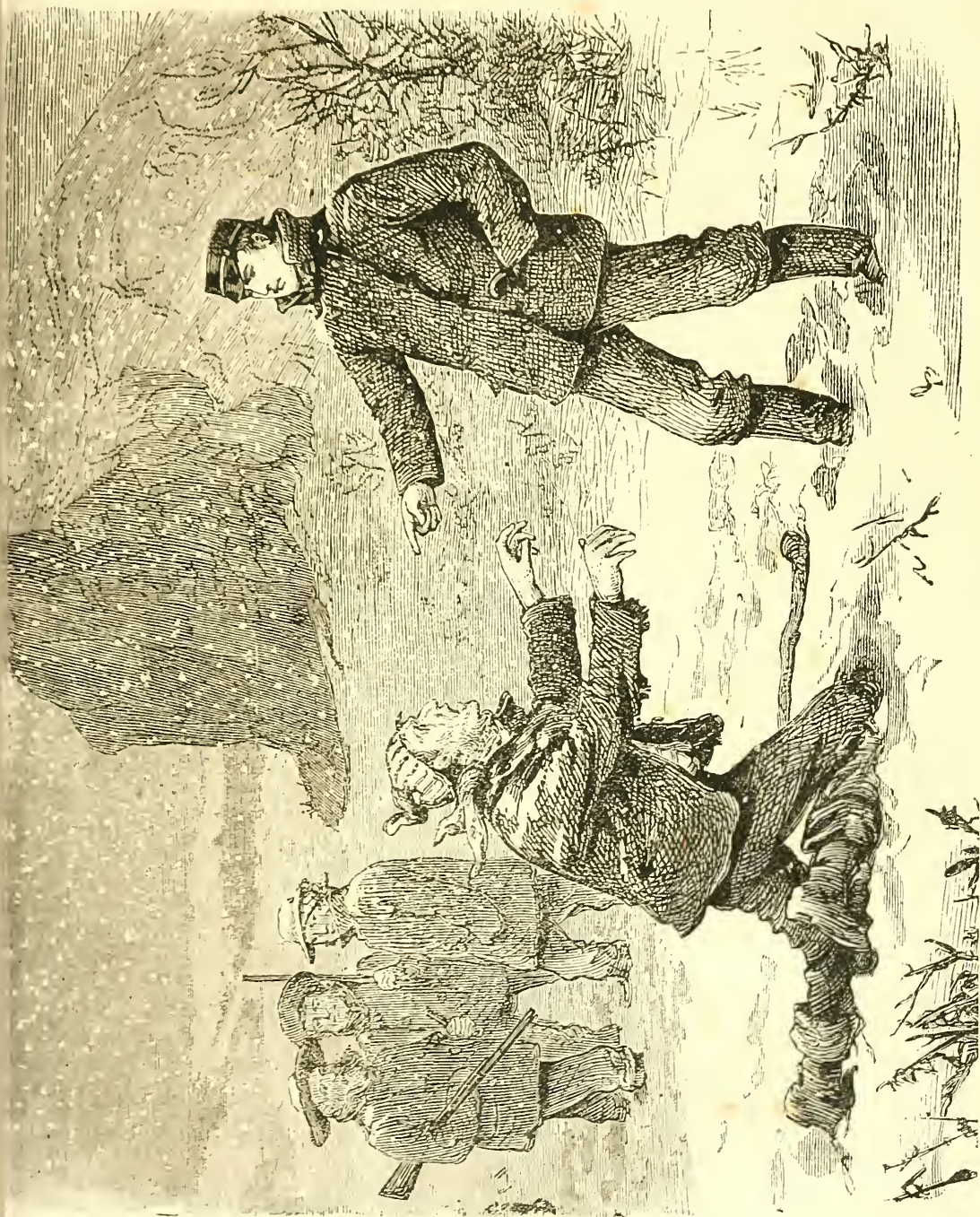
"Thank you," said the man, "I'm better now. But it's lucky I saw you up there, or I must have died."

"You say we can give no help to anybody else?" asked Jack.

"None," said the man, sadly. "All dead."

"Then sleep a little," rejoined Jack, "and by-and-by you shall tell us your story."





"OH, HAVE MERCY—MERCY!" CRIED THE SNEEZER."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE STORY OF THE MINER—A CALL FOR VENGEANCE—JACK PROMISES TO RESTORE.

THE wounded man slept until the night had come, and the inhabitants of Mapletown were gathered round their respective hearths.

Jerek Grittle's hut not being absolutely air-tight, Ben and Jacob were engaged in plugging certain cracks when the stranger came into the room.

"Are you better now?" asked Jack.

"Much better, thank you," he replied. "My wound is nothing, but it bled a lot and made me faint."

"Could you eat anything?"

"Aye, that I could, right heartily."

Ben put some food before him, and he made a fair meal, afterwards filling his pipe, and joining the others round the fire.

"Now, perhaps," he said, "you would like to hear my story?"

"I should, indeed," said Jack.

"I'll make it as short as I can," said the stranger. "And here it is—"

"In the first place my name is Daniel Smollet, and for the last five years I've been digging and prospecting for gold there; I never did much till I joined four pals nine months ago, and then we rolled it in as if it were sand of the shore.

"We were careful men, and having made enough to live on, we made up our minds to start for New York, intending to ship from there to the Old Country."

"You are English, then?" said Jack.

"Yes, all English," answered Daniel Smollet, "and that's what brought us together. 'Birds of a feather,' you know. Well, we thought we would go overland, and having stowed our brass in packages, we loaded half-a-dozen mules one night and started. We thought at first that we might be followed, but it wasn't so, and to our great joy we got clear away.

"Up to here, I mean," he said, with a grim smile. "We had just reached the foot of this mountain last night, when a party of about a score overtook us. They seemed good-natured, rollicking chaps, and as they didn't show any malice, we feared nothing.

"But, curse 'em!" he said, with sudden fury, shaking his clenched fist in the air, "they were thieves and murderers. They talked of the money they had made, and what they would do with it when they got home, and, like fools, we talked too. Having put up a rough shelter against the wind, we all lay down to sleep.

"The night was very dark, and I suppose they let it slip by on that account; anyway it was almost broad daylight when I awoke. I saw a chap bending over me. He made a stab at my chest with a knife, and I dodged it, getting this cut on my forehead. Then I gave him a blow that made his teeth rattle, and I jumped up.

"I saw, then, at a glance what had happened. My chums all lay murdered within a few feet of me, and the gang were busy plundering our packages. The chap who had tried the game on with me didn't seem to care to come on again, but went to get his share of the plunder, and I got away."

"And none followed you?" said Jack.

"None," he answered; "they were all too busy, and I hid among the trees at the foot of the mountain until they went away. The cold stopped my forehead bleeding for a time, but it broke out afresh when I moved on again. I saw you up here, and I came on. That's all."

"And enough, too, my poor fellow," said Jack. "Now about that band. Can you describe them?"

"They called themselves the Bowie Boys."

"That sounds rather shady. And you suspected nothing?"

"No; they were so easy and jolly like. There was one man among them they called the Swaggerer."

"The what?" cried Jack, leaping to his feet.

"The Swaggerer—a good-looking chap enough, but rather vicious about the eyes. Do you know him?"

"Yes," answered Jack; "we are old acquaintances."

He got up and walked to and fro for a while in an agitated manner. The others remained silent.

"Jacob," he cried, at last, "are you too tired to go out to-night?"

"Am I ever tired in your service?" was the reply.

"And you, Ben?"

"I am ready for anything, Master Jack.

"Go, then, and bring me tidings of where these men are to be found."

His two followers rose, took their rifles, looked to their revolvers, and departed.

"You have not lost your fortune yet," said Jack, kindly, to Daniel Smollet. "We will get it back for you, and avenge your comrades' murder.

"What can be done against so many?" he asked.

"Wait and see," said Jack.

In a little while he went out softly, and walked to a spot that gave him a view of the plain by day.

It could be seen plainly now, for the air was still, and the heavens full of stars.

Far away there was the reflection of a fire.

"The camp of the Bowie Boys," said Jack. "Ben and Jacob have an easy task before them. They will return ere the sun rises."

He went back and bade Daniel Smollet to rest. The man demurred, saying that he had not long been awake.

"Do as I bid you," said Jack; "you may want your strength to-morrow."

The man retired, and Jack, having thrown some logs on the fire, rolled himself up in a rug, and lay down before it. In a little time he slept.

Twice he awoke to replenish the fire, and slept again. The logs were smouldering for the third time, when Ben and Jacob came in.

Jack sprang to his feet, awake in a moment.

"You have found them?" he said.

"They are encamped by the lee side of a wood, about six miles from here," replied Jacob, "and they're going to stay there for a few days."

"You overheard them say so?"

"Yes; we crept up to within pistol-shot. It was late, but they were all drinking."

"You saw the Swaggerer?"

"Yes, and the Panther, and that sneezing fellow, and that Yankee they picked up in New York. Oh, they are a bully band!"

"Take three hours' rest," said Jack, "and we will go upon their trail."

"In daylight?"

"Why not? There is cover for us to come up unseen?"

"Plenty."

"Then what do we want more? When we get there, I will tell you what we will do."

They did not attempt to debate the question with him, although they thought he was rash. He was their leader, and they had sworn to obey him implicitly though he led to certain death.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ACROSS THE PRAIRIE—LOST IN THE STORM—A DREADFUL STILLNESS.

At the time appointed, Jack and his three followers, Daniel Smollet making the third, went down Maple Mountain to the plain.

The day was well advanced, but the sun invisible, for the sky was covered with murky clouds.

The wind set the branches of the trees groaning, and altogether it was as cheerless a day as one would care to be out in.

But they were all wrapped in thick

pilot-jackets, and cared little for the cold; though the prospect of another downfall of snow gave Jack cause for some anxiety.

"We shall have a storm, Jacob," he said, as these two strolled on ahead.

"Aye, dear lad, and a smart one," replied Sturmby; "what we are going to do had better be done quickly."

"The storm may help us," rejoined Jack, calmly, "for we are few and they are many, and I trust in a surprise."

"What is your plan?"

"I propose to get near them without being observed, then fire a few shots in the air, all shout together, and rush on."

"Shots in the air!" exclaimed Jacob, "you won't hit anybody."

"Nobody must be hit," said Jack; "no accident must deprive me of my lawful revenge."

"Ah, I see, Master Jack," said Jacob, thoughtfully, "I didn't reckon on that. But perhaps you won't be able to curb him," jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Daniel Smollet, "as you might wish."

"He must obey me," said Jack, "or I will not help him. Tell him what my wishes are."

Jacob fell back and enlightened Smollet on this point.

"Whatever the young master orders," he said, "I am ready to do."

"That's right," replied Jacob; "there's nothing like obedience, especially when you have a good leader."

The wind increased, and the day grew more dark and dreary.

In the horizon it seemed as if night were prematurely returning.

"Master Jack," said Jacob, with a hurried glance at the sky, "it's well we hurried on."

"Indeed!"

"Aye, dear lad; it's as much as we shall do to get there, and do our work before the storm comes."

"Go on," said Jack, "you are certain of your road."

"My point," replied Jacob, "is yonder rock that lies like a lump on the plain. They're behind it."

"Unless they have moved on."

"They won't move this weather. There's no other shelter but Maple Mountain for a dozen miles."

For a little time they kept on in silence. Then from the leaden sky a few small flakes came fluttering down.

"We shall be in it directly," muttered Jacob.

"I know my way," said Jack, "and will get on. You follow, and keep at the foot of the rock—"

"But, dear lad—"

"Do as I tell you. I am only going to reconnoitre."

With a quick smile and a wave of the hand, he increased his pace, the flakes

falling faster and faster each moment, and growing larger.

Jacob kept his eyes straight on the figure of his young leader, which, as the storm rapidly increased in vigour, became misty, and was finally lost.

Then the snowfall began to show how heavy it would be.

The wind swept by in one great gust, and suddenly dropped. The snow, thick and fast, fell lightly.

"This is bad," said Daniel Smollet.

"Don't talk to me," replied Jacob. "I shall want all my wits to keep straight on."

And nothing is more difficult in darkness, or where objects cannot be seen in a storm or a fog.

Travellers in such a case have been known to make a complete circle on a plain, when they thought they were going straight on, and found themselves on the spot from which they started.

Jacob not only knew it, but had experienced it. Therefore he bade them not distract his attention for a moment.

If the wind had not dropped he would have had the drift of the snow for a guide, but even that was now denied.

The snow fell straight as the line of a plummet, and as silently as the footsteps of a spectre.

With an anxious heart, Jacob hastened on. Faster fell the snow, darker grew the day.

Suddenly he paused and faced about.

"Lads," he said, "I'm afeared we've got out of the straight track. We ought to have been at the rock by this time."

"I was so thinking," said Ben, "but I said nowt, for my head ain't so clear as it was."

"Stand still," said Jacob, as Daniel Smollet shifted about, "the least turn may put us farther out of the track."

"I hear summat," said Ben, stooping a little.

"What was it?" asked Jacob.

"A shout. There's another and another."

They were all silent for a few moments, and heard, some distance on the right, not only the shout, but a rapid firing.

Their experience could distinguish the sharp crack of the rifle, and the pattering of the revolver.

"As I feared," said Jacob, with a

groan. "I've bore a little to the left, and got out of the track."

"More firing," said Ben.

"They've found the lad."

"And what's one to so many?"

They were hurrying on while speaking, in the direction of the sounds. The firing was an infallible guide.

"There's the big rock," said Jacob, pointing to a dim shadow ahead, and in a few moments it loomed tolerably clear.

On the side by which they approached, it was as straight as a cliff by the sea. There the snow could not lie, and it stood out boldly.

The firing was on the other side.

"We must go round," cried Jacob.

"Mind how you go, it's broken ground here."

It was very rough, and none the easier to traverse from the snow having already fallen sufficiently to hide hollows deep enough to be dangerous pitfalls.

They had several falls ere they had gone far. Jacob Sturmby called a halt.

The firing had ceased.

"What does that mean?" he asked, with a palpitating heart; "they can't have killed him?"

"Who knows?" said Ben; "it was a mad thing for him to go on alone."

"If they've killed him," said Jacob, fiercely, "his work shall be finished. I'll carry it out."

"Ah, that's for me," said old Ben. "Don't forget my lad, lying in the plain far away. He's dead, but he doesn't rest yet."

"We must be close on the spot," said Jacob, as he stumbled and fell for the third time; "be quiet a moment."

They stood still and listened.

Not a sound could be heard, and nothing seen through the blinding fall.

"What ill-luck's come to us?" said Jacob, despairingly; "they've killed him!"

"Woe—woe!" murmured old Ben, "so young, so noble! Are all the young to die?"

And in his eyes there came something of the look that was in them when he stood by his own dead boy.

For aught Jacob Sturmby knew, the foe might be within a few yards of him, silently lying in wait for his coming.

All things pointed to Jack's being slain.

The firing, so brisk at first, had ceased, and no sound broke the stillness. The silence was only to be accounted for by the victory of the enemy.

Then came a ray of light.

"Perhaps they've only taken him prisoner," thought Jacob, "and we may save him yet. Oh, that this ill-timed storm would cease."

But hope as he might, the snow fell faster, and the air grew darker.

"Suppose they have taken him away? Where shall I turn—whither shall I go?"

It was a terrible thought, and appalled Jack's faithful follower. Suppose he were a prisoner, scant mercy would be shown him, nor would they keep him long.

In his death lay their safety.

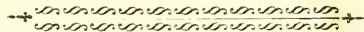
And suppose he were dead?

Jacob Sturmby dared not believe that, even while the belief seemed thrust upon him.

Despair settled upon him, and with a groan he sank upon his knees.

"Heaven help the lad!" he murmured.

But there seemed no answer to his prayer. The snow fell faster, and the day grew darker.



CHAPTER XL.

NOT SO FAR AWAY—THE RECOVERED TREASURE—THE SNEEZER'S USUAL LUCK.

"I WANT to find somebody," said Jacob Sturmby, clenching his hands; "one or more of that lot, to take it out of them."

But the blinding snow shut out everything from his view, and in the bitter-

ness of his heart, he cursed the expedition they had come upon.

Daniel Smollet came in for some hard words, but immediately afterwards received an apology.

"Of course, it's not your fault,"

he said. "I spoke hastily, but if you knew what he was to me—"

And pausing, he turned his face away and groaned.

"I can understand," replied Daniel Smollet, softly. "He's about as bright and spry a lad as ever I set eyes on."

"You never set eyes on one like him," said Jacob.

"Only one ever came within a mile of him," sighed Ben; "and much as I loved him—and he was my own dear son—I can't say that he was his equal."

"And now he is dead," moaned Jacob; "and I—"

"Jacob!"

What voice was that which came so suddenly upon him?

It was apparently near, and yet it had a smothered sound.

"Master Jack!" cried Jacob, "is it you?"

"Of course it is," was the cheery reply. "I am having a rest behind this screen. Can't you see it?"

"Lord save us, no!" said Jacob, dashing forward. "But I soon will."

It was a screen of blankets, covered with snow, so arranged as to bend over a little, and shield anyone on the other side.

Jacob soon found it, for he blundered against it immediately.

"Steady," said Jack, "or you will have the whole thing down. Go a little more to the left, and come round."

Jacob and his companions obeyed this injunction, and found themselves close to Jack, who was sheltered from the snow, and sitting on a package which Daniel Smollet saw was his property.

"Master Jack," exclaimed Jacob, "we thought you were dead."

"Not yet," replied Jack, coolly; "but I had enough shots fired at me to decimate a regiment."

"So they did see you?"

"Like you, Jacob, I blundered against this screen, and I heard them shout on the other side. Then I saw that I must be bold, and called out: 'This way, my men! Death to the thieves and murderers!'"

"Good!" said Jacob, and old Ben chuckled.

"They all made off pell-mell, emptying their revolvers as they went."

"And you were not hit, dear lad?"

"A bullet grazed the skin of my thigh, but it is nothing."

"But you, Master Jack, didn't you bring some of 'em down?" asked Ben.

"No, I've not fired a shot; I might have hit one whom I wish to spare for the present, and I should have also shown my whereabouts."

"Hurrah! Master Jack for ever!" cried Ben.

"I don't think we will make more noise than we can help," said Jack; "they are roaming about somewhere not far away. I've scattered them pretty well, but I daresay they are creeping about cautiously for fear of meeting the host brought against them."

"Who would think them such cowards?" said Jacob.

"They are like rats," said Jack, "for they will run when they can, but fight if they are pushed into a corner."

In addition to the package Jack was sitting on, there were several others, and Smollet pointed them out as belonging to himself or his dead chums.

"Some are light enough," said Jacob, as he raised one, and poised it on his hand.

"We only brought some gold with us," said Smollet, "the rest is in bills on New York banks. One mule could easily carry the lot, and me into the bargain."

But the mules were not in sight, and had probably been cast adrift to roam where they pleased. They were never seen again by their owner.

By Jack's advice, the packages were divided, and strapped upon their backs. He would have carried his share, but they would not hear of it.

"I'd rather leave it behind," said Smollet; "I'm mortal grateful to you as things are."

"Then I will convoy you back," said Jack. "We ought to be moving. The snow is not falling so fast, and it is growing light."

They all understood the caution conveyed in his words.

The band of desperadoes could not be far away, and if the weather cleared, the limited numbers pitted against them might tempt them to attack.

Jack was not afraid of them, but a hand-to-hand fight was just then antagonistic to his plans.

The sky was clearing, but very slowly.

Jack, however, knew his road for returning. He had never missed the point, and set his face straight for Maple Mountain.

Ere they had gone far, however, he suddenly, in an undertone, called a halt.

"Be still for a moment, please," he said, softly.

A sound had reached his ears, and somebody not far away was soliloquising, or speaking to another.

"Oh, dear, where have I got to? Atchew! atchew! This life is horrible—awful! Atchew! Frightened out of my life one minute, and frozen to death the next."

A meaning smile passed over Jack's face. He knew who it was proclaiming his misery aloud.

"Stay here," he said to his companions, "I will soon return."

It was the Sneezer bemoaning his lot, and he was still muttering and groaning when Jack caught sight of him dimly outlined in the snow.

He was crawling about, bent almost double with the cold, and blowing on his fingers to warm them.

"If you are tired of your life," said Jack, "I will put an end to it, although the time I have chosen is not yet come."

"Oh, mercy!" gasped the Sneezer, falling on his knees, and staring wildly about him.

"Do you dare to ask who I am?" sternly demanded Jack.

"No, no!" gasped the Sneezer; "I know. Oh, have mercy—mercy! Atchew!—atchew! a—a—ara—a—a—atchew—w!"

The last sneeze was a masterpiece. The Sneezer had never before produced anything to equal it, and would assuredly never excel it.

It could be heard, despite the heavy air, far over the plain.

Jack smiled, grimly.

"So much a coward, and so great a villain," he murmured. Then aloud he said: "You ask for mercy. Do you deserve it?"

"I don't know," groaned the Sneezer.

"Liar!" hissed Jack. "Do you forget the past—my slaughtered father—my dear brother and faithful friend, brutally tossed into the sea to die by inches?"

"Oh, oh!" was all the Sneezer could say.

"Groan on," said Jack, advancing; "groan on a while, I say. It is fitting that such as you should live for a time to show others how abject a black heart can make us."

"I'll try to be a better man if you will spare me," said the Sneezer, now nearly on his face in the snow.

"The old story," said Jack, contemptuously; "but I know the stuff you are made of. In security, a villain—in peril, a poltroon. Spare you! Does one spare the sneaking wolf? I'll not spare you."

The Sneezer fell flat in the snow, and kicked convulsively. Jack lightly spurned him with his foot.

"Die hourly and daily," he said, "and, living, be sure that your end is near. Be ready at any moment for my coming, coward, dog, thief, and murderer!"

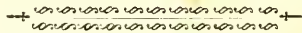
Again he spurned him with his foot, in sheer contempt for his cowardice, and, with the gait of a young lion, returned to his friends.

"The sky gets brighter every moment," said Sturmby.

"In a quarter of an hour it will be clear," said Jack.

"And we are at least three miles from Maple Mountain."

"Let us hurry on; I do not wish to be seen here to-day."



CHAPTER XLI.

AN ASTONISHING RETREAT—BAD RASCALS—A BIT OF A SHOCK.

AMONG those who had fled when Jack alarmed the band, none were more startled than the Swaggerer. He re-

cognised the voice, and the startling suddenness of Jack's arrival was sufficient to set him running for dear life,

and, like the others, firing his revolver at random.

In fact, they were all alarmed. They had not anticipated the arrival of a foe, and could not see him when he came. They could not measure his strength, nor reckon upon what he might do.

Therefore their fear guided them, and they fled, blundering about and scattering in every direction.

There were scarcely two who kept together. The panic was complete.

But after a while the firing ceased, mainly owing to all the barrels being emptied; then some of the cooler heads began to wonder what they had run away for, and the opinion they entertained of themselves was far from complimentary.

"We are a set of fools," muttered the Swaggerer; "why did we not keep together?"

He asked the question, and his conscience gave him the answer. They did not keep together because they were cowards at heart.

He stood alone as far as he could see. If any were near him they were hidden by the fall, and their footsteps muffled by the snow.

The idea of shouting to see if any were near he abandoned as being risky. He had recognised Jack's voice, and Jack might recognise him. If he did, the result might be disastrous to the Swaggerer.

"No, I won't shout," he said, "but walk about until I meet somebody."

He walked to and fro for some time, and neither heard nor saw anything of his friends, but finally he got into the neighbourhood, and heard the Sneezer praying for mercy.

He was not near enough to catch his words, and the fact of the tone being supplicating did not trouble him. The Sneezer always spoke with more or less of a whine.

In a few minutes the noise ceased, and that was especially aggravating, as the Swaggerer had got into this neighbourhood, and was rejoicing at the prospect of a companion, cowardly though he might be.

"Confound it!" he muttered. "Where is he?"

He heaped several anathemas on the head of the silent Sneezer, and then

crossing his track without noticing his prostrate form, tripped over him.

"Oh, spare me, and I'll do anything!" groaned the Sneezer. "Put me into a coal-pit, shut me up in a nunnery—anything you like, only let me live!"

"Hold your row!" growled the Swaggerer; "it's only me."

"Who's me?" faintly asked the Sneezer.

"The Swaggerer."

"But it wasn't you a minute ago."

"What do you mean by that? If it wasn't me, who was it?"

The Sneezer sat up and sneezed.

"Are you sure that you are alone?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Can't you see I am?" said the Swaggerer. "Haven't I been roaming about alone for an hour or more?"

"But haven't you seen him?" asked the Sneezer, shaking and shivering. "Oh, haven't you seen him?"

"I heard him," said the Swaggerer, curtly.

"And that was enough," said the Sneezer. "Oh, don't deny it; I hear it now. It would have been enough for me, but he pounced on me here, and he swore at me, and jumped on me, and rolled me about. Oh—atchew! atchew!—it was awful!"

"Do you mean to say that you saw young Jack here?" asked the Swaggerer, seizing him by the arm.

"I mean to say it," replied the Sneezer, "because it is true."

"And was he alone?"

"I didn't see anybody with him."

"What boobies, idiots, we have been!" hissed the Swaggerer. "Of course, I might have known it. Only one voice was heard, and yet we ran like sheep."

"Very much like sheep," said the Sneezer, "but then, you see, the shearer was coming."

"Don't give me any of your milk-and-water jokes," snarled the Swaggerer. "Where are the rest? The storm is clearing. Shout, and see where they are."

And he struck the Sneezer a heavy blow.

The Sneezer turned savagely upon the Swaggerer.

"Shout yourself," he cried. "What

do you mean by rapping my head, and making me see blue lights?"

"I'll make you see lights of all sizes and colours," said the Swaggerer, advancing to repeat the compliment.

But the Sneezzer retreated and dodged about.

"You let me alone," he said. "Hit one of your own size. Shout yourself, you surly brute."

"I'll make you smart for this," muttered the infuriated Swaggerer. "You defy me, you pumpernickel beggar. Who next, I wonder!"

"It don't matter what I do," said the Sneezzer, recklessly. "I'm a doomed man. Shout yourself."

"What's the little movement going on there?" asked the voice of Makepeace Jibber, as he suddenly appeared before them. "What are you two quarrelling for?"

"Never mind us," said the Swaggerer, hurriedly. "There's another we have to think about. The cub is hereabouts; he is alone, and it was he who frightened us, asses that we were. Have you any men handy?"

"Half-a-dozen within shouting distance."

"Then bring them in; the storm is lifting, and you will have him at your mercy. Keep your part of the contract."

"Show me him alone," said Makepeace Jibber, "and consider it done."

"In a minute," said the Swaggerer, feverishly; "it will be clear in ten minutes."

As he spoke, the sunlight broke through the diminishing storm, and in a few moments the snow ceased to fall.

The objects on the plain stood out clear to the view.

Halfway between Jibber and his companions and Maple Mountain were Jack and his friends.

They were moving on at a swift pace towards their temporary home.

"There he is," said the Swaggerer.

"But not alone," replied Jibber, thoughtfully, scraping his chin; "he's got others with him, and if they are only half as good as himself—"

"I see," said the Swaggerer, with a short disagreeable laugh, "you are afraid of him."

"I am a prudent man," he answered; "but if all my men were here, I'd have

a run at him. But jest look at them. All over the plain like old women scattered by a mad buffler."

There were, however, three near him, and one of them was the Panther, whose quick eye had distinguished Jack.

"So we owe the scare to him," he said, as he advanced.

"Seems so," said Makepeace Jibber, "and he came over for our booty, though Jehoshaphat only knows how he scented it."

"He knows everything," groaned the Sneezzer.

"Are you going to let him run off with the brass?" demanded the Swaggerer.

"No, hang me if I am!" replied Jibber, ferociously. "Will you jine in?"

"I'm on for one," said the Panther; "I can fight a bit in daylight, but I shirk my grandmother's tom-cat in darkness or in a mist."

Some of Jibber's band had espied him, and were running towards him as fast as the snow would allow.

He signalled to them to hurry on, and went forward in Jack's trail.

His coming was noted, for Jack turned his head for a moment and saw him. He said something to his friends, and they hastened on.

"By George, they run!" cried the Swaggerer.

"What the devil is there to be afraid of?" asked the Panther.

"Nothing," said the Sneezzer, with sudden boldness; adding, in a whisper: "He's afraid of us. Hark forward! Hey! tallo, tallo!"

Jibber's men were coming in fast, and he now had seven or eight at his heels.

In a few words he explained the nature of the work before them.

"Aim at the boy," he said, "when we rush in. If he's down, the others will cave in."

Makepeace Jibber, with one of his men, headed the pursuers, the latter being a nimble-footed rascal who had had to stretch his legs and feet for more than one escape from the hands of justice.

He was known among his friends by the *sobriquet* of Bolter.

Side by side the pair ran fast for a time, but at length the Bolter began to

forge ahead. He got about two yards in front of Jibber, and that distance was kept between them.

Meanwhile Jack and his friends were apparently flying in terror from their foes.

They did not exactly run, but had broken into a swinging trot that covered a lot of ground, and prevented the gap between them and their pursuers from lessening very rapidly.

But lessen it did.

The Bolter gained on them, and the rest were not far behind.

The Swaggerer, the Panther, and the Sneezer brought up the rear.

The prudential motives that governed their movements can easily be guessed.

"Go it, Bolter," said Makepeace Jibber.

"I'm a-going," replied Bolter.

"Have your shooter ready, and blaze away as soon as you are near enough."

"I'll cover, and let fly at him in a moment."

Maple Mountain was almost reached when these utterances were exchanged.

Already Daniel Smollet, who had been urged to keep in front, had reached one of the lower slopes, and was scrambling up.

A few yards behind him were old

Ben and Jacob Sturmbay, puffing like a pair of old grampuses.

Last of all came he who might, if he had willed it so, have been foremost—Jack, without a burden, nimble and active on his feet, and with no sign of loss of breath.

"Get on," he cried to Jacob and Ben.

"We are going," gasped Jacob; "but why do you keep behind, Master Jack?"

"I'll join you in a moment," he answered.

As he spoke, he swung round and stood upright as an arrow before his advancing foes.

The action was so unexpected that the foremost had no time to mark its purport, and the Bolter came headlong on.

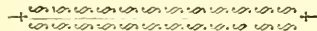
"Stop!" cried Jack, levelling his revolver at him.

He did not stop, though he saw death in the muzzle, because he could not, and sudden terror prevented him using his own weapon.

Jack fired point-blank at the ruffian.

The Bolter leaped into the air, and Makepeace Jibber tripped over him as he fell.

The rest pulled up, and the Swaggerer, the Sneezer, and the Panther turned tail and fairly ran.



CHAPTER XLII.

A FRIENDLY HINT—A NIGHT ALARM.

"THE man who comes a step farther, dies!" cried Jack, still with his weapon raised. "Keep your hands down there."

They kept them down, for they saw that he was not to be trifled with, and he backed slowly until he reached his friends, who were waiting for him a hundred yards away.

Then they faced about and walked coolly up the slope, as if they left nothing but stones and trees behind them.

The Bolter and Makepeace Jibber lay still.

The others, amazed, gathered round and looked first at their prostrate forms, then at each other.

"Did he pink the pair?" asked one.

"Seems so," said another; "two birds with one bullet."

Makepeace Jibber opened one eye.

"Is that young cantankerous catamount gone?" he softly asked.

"Yes, he's gone," replied another; "walked off like a New York swell crawling to his dinner. He wasn't in any hurry, he wasn't."

Makepeace Jibber opened the other eye.

"Why didn't some of you shoot him?" he asked.

"Why didn't you?" they retorted.

"A man lying doubled up like a blessed armadillo can't shoot."

"No more can people with hands down. He'd have picked out the first of us that so much as winked."

Makepeace Jibber sat up.

"There he goes," he said, looking at Jack's retreating form; "cool—as—a—cowcumber. Talk of strategy—this beats all. It's a good thing for the Bolter that he was in front."

"Is he hurt?" they asked.

Makepeace Jibber turned his follower over, opened his shirt, and pointed to a small round hole over the region of his heart.

"Whenever you see a man jump as he did," he said, "you can tell where the bullet's knocked and entered. Poor Bolter! he'll never dodge a New York policeman again."

"We'd better bury him anyhow," said one of the men.

"There's a job for them as likes it," replied Jibber, as he walked off.

He went to the place where they had been camping, and was soon joined by the Swaggerer and the Panther.

Both were gloomy, and Makepeace Jibber looked very savage.

"This is a nice business of yours," he said. "Robbed me of one of my best men."

"Well, there's three of us," replied the Swaggerer.

"It would take about nine of you to make one like him," replied Jibber. "And yet," he added, sarcastically, "you all run pretty well."

"I can't tell how it is," said the Swaggerer, wiping his forehead with his coat-sleeve. "A sort of spell comes over me when I meet that fellow; and yet there's nothing in him—he's only a boy."

"His shooting is pretty," said Jibber. "I knew, the moment he took aim, that the Bolter's clock would be stopped. Durn me, it was a close shave for more than one!"

"I suppose our contract's broken," said the Swaggerer, after a pause.

"I won't say that," said Jibber. "I'll look about and see how the land lies. We've failed in daylight, and we'll try the night next."

A rough form of burial was given to the Bolter, and that work being done, the men came in—a solemn, dispirited lot, and their tempers not at all improved when they learnt that the money, for which they had committed two cruel murders, had been taken away.

"Some people bring bad luck to a gang," they muttered, and angry glances were cast at the trio whom they considered had brought trouble upon them.

The Swaggerer tried to make light of their looks, and to win them over by banter.

"Of course," he said, "we are to blame. We told the Bolter to keep on ahead and make himself a sure mark for the enemy. Isn't it so, Jibber?"

"Oh, you be skinned," muttered Jibber. "Now, just you look here. We'll have another go at this youngster, and if we don't bring it off, then I cry off."

"And they had better be off," said one of the men, with a meaning nod.

And the others gruffly responded—

"That's so."

"Very good," said the Swaggerer, with affected ease. "If anything goes wrong the second time we'll cut the Bowie Boys."

The afternoon was now clear, and the snow having ceased to fall, they were able to rearrange their rude camp, and make it more comfortable.

But it was a poor resting-place at the best, as they could have no fire.

In front they made a wall of snow, breast-high, which made the place warm, and could take the place of an earth-work in case of attack.

Outside this, as the night drew on, Makepeace Jibber decided to keep a sentry.

"And as this hullabaloo is all about you and your pals," he said to the Swaggerer, "you had better do the work between you."

"Naturally," replied the Swaggerer; "it is just what I expected."

This arrangement could have but one issue, and that was the appointment of the Sneezer to the post.

"You will take first watch," said the Swaggerer.

"Oh, yes, I know," replied the hapless Sneezer; "first watch all night, as I've done before. Mind I don't run away."

"Where will you go to?" asked the Swaggerer. "Do you forget the Pantaloon? He might have been alive now if he had kept with us."

"That's what you say," said the

Sneezer, "but you ain't fool enough to think it."

To this the Swaggerer offered no reply. He could not readily find a denial, and an admission of the truth of it would not have done at any price.

At night, then, we find the Sneezer pacing up and down outside the snowy wall. The stars shone brightly overhead, and a piercing frost freezed his very bones.

Under his arm he carried a rifle, the property of Makepeace Jibber, who, in handing it to him, gave the following instructions—

"If you see a man moving our way,

shoot him first, and then ask him what's his business here."

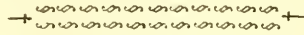
"I'll let fly at him," replied the Sneezer, "but I won't promise you that I hit him."

The tired men lay close together for warmth, wrapped in such extra garments and blankets as they were possessed of, and ere long they were all asleep.

But not for long.

Barely had the sleepers fallen into their first dream, when the report of a rifle was heard, and the voice of Sneezer shrieking—

"Help—help! Murder!—atchew!—help!—atchew!"



CHAPTER XLIII.

NOT MUCH TO BE ALARMED AT—A NEW AULY AND A NEAT LITTLE PLOT.

On hearing the report of the Sneezer's rifle, another stampede in the camp was imminent, but Makepeace Jibber, with more presence of mind than the rest, came to the rescue.

"Steady there," he roared; "don't think you are durned rabbits. Sneezer, what's the row there?"

But the Sneezer only answered with his nose, and, judging by the sound, was rolling in the snow, sneezing his head off.

Makepeace Jibber went to the snowy parapet and peeped over. At a short distance he could see the form of a stranger, dimly defined against the snow-covered plain.

"Who's there?" he cried, covering the stranger with his revolver; "speak, or I'll begin to make a cullender of you."

"It's a friendly greeting this, send I may die," replied the stranger. "It's enough to tempt me to come again and help you, comb my back if it ain't."

"Are you alone?" asked Jibber.

"Of course I am," was the reply.

"Then come forward, hands down, and show yourself."

"Oh, atchew!—atchew!" gasped the Sneezer; "it's me he wants—my time is come!"

"What sort of crittur is this?" the stranger asked; "I came along, and I spoke friendly. Then he lets fly at me,

and tumbles down on his back as if I'd riddled him."

"Let him have his roll out," said Jibber, "and come over here. You see we are strong enough to stop any nonsense."

"You are," replied the stranger, as he calmly surveyed the men behind him, now quiet enough, and ranged in an uneven row, with their weapons handy.

He came over the parapet, and turning to Jibber, stretched out his hand.

"Shake it," he said.

"I hope it is honest," replied Makepeace Jibber, "for we are all honest here. Too honest to make much headway in this ere sinful world."

The stranger grinned.

"Feel my grip," he said.

"I have it," replied Jibber.

"What's it like?"

"True grit; and now what's your name?"

"Slideaway Bunks, junior, and my home is Maple Mountain yonder."

There was a movement of surprise among the party, and more than one weapon was raised towards him.

Slideaway, junior, hastened to explain.

"I'm no friend to that youngster," he said, and stooping down, he held his head towards Jibber. "Feel that."

Jibber put his hand on the back part of his cranium.

"What do you find there?"

"A bit of plaster."

"Is there a lot of it?"

"Enough to make a shirt on."

"Behind that 'ere plaster," said young Slideaway, slowly and solemnly, "there's a hole big enough for a hen to lay an egg in."

"And who made that hole?"

"I'm coming to it," said Slideaway, junior.

"Go on."

"When I ax a feller to wrastle," continued Slideaway, junior, "I mean him for to wrastle; not to pick me up and chuck me on my head afore I'd time to sneeze."

"It's like him," the Swaggerer interposed; "his game is to take people unawares."

"You know the catamount?" said young Slideaway.

"A little."

"So, then, we all start fair," said Slideaway. "I was up the mountain a bit when you chivied him, and I saw the way he turned and let fly at you afore you had time to wink. I also see one of your party give a skip and come down heavy, and I says to myself, 'It's a bad sugar time for him.'"

"Well, what does all this come to?" asked Makepeace Jibber.

"To this," said young Slideaway, ferociously: "that I jine you, and help you to clear him out."

"Good."

"He's a Britisher, and he's got British ways, and they don't suit Maple Mountain. So he must be wiped away."

"Better still."

"And I'll bet, on the name o' Bunks, which is heard of and afearcd on about these parts, that if I join you he can be bottled up and corked down."

"You can't say better than that," said Makepeace Jibber; "you are a man."

"And you are another. Here's my hand."

"I've got it."

And then they shook hands again warmly, and the bond of rascality between them was sealed.

After this young Slideaway shook hands all round, beginning at the Swaggerer, and ending at the Sneezzer, who had got over his fright, and assumed

a joviality that was assuredly not from his heart.

"I hope I didn't frighten you?" he said.

"You skeered me a little," replied Slideaway, junior. "You popped sudden, and the bullet sailed over my head like a humming-bird in a hurry."

"The confounded fool," said Jibber, shaking his fist at the Sneezzer; "didn't he challenge you?"

"Nary bit," was the reply.

Jibber kicked the Sneezzer, and sent him up against the Swaggerer, who kicked him onto the Panther, who shot him onto Slideaway Bunks, junior, and he knocked him down.

"Having squared that job," said Jibber, "let's to business. What's your plan?"

"I'll talk it over while I have a pipe," replied young Slideaway.

They all went under the rude shelter, and sat down. Most of them smoked, and all listened intently to the suggestions put forward by Slideaway, junior.

What they were will soon be seen. Suffice it to say for the present that his new associates approved of his plan.

Just before dawn he rose to go.

"Now mind, then," said Makepeace Jibber, "none of your deceiving."

"Can't you see the truth a-shining out of me?" asked young Slideaway.

"It might be shining like blazes," said the Swaggerer, "and yet an extinguisher could be put over it if you had a mind to."

"Blarm it!" said Slideaway, angrily, "Do you think I'm going to put up with the tunnel he's made in my head?"

"Not if you are a man."

"And who says I ain't?" demanded Slideaway. "If there's one, let him stand forward, and I'll wrastle with him."

Nobody accepted this offer, and, after grumbling a bit, he became calmed.

"To-night," he said, "as soon as the sun's down, come, if you are in a mind to, and I'll meet you. If you are afraid, or doubt me, stay away."

"We'll come," said Makepeace Jibber.

And then, with a parting nod, Slideaway, junior, bounded over the snow wall, and set his face towards Maple Mountain.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SLIDEAWAY, JUNIOR, PLAYS THE SPIDER—THE BAND OF VILLAINY AND TREACHERY.

JACK was alone in his room in the house of Jerek Grittle, and the hour was noon, when there came a timid conciliating knock at the door.

"Come in," he said.

"May I come in? Really this is tarnation kind of you," said Slideaway Bunks, junior, as he sidled into the room. "It seems to me that you ain't like most Britishers. There's no pride about you."

"Sit down," said Jack, quietly, "and tell me what you want."

"I don't want much, bless you," said young Slideaway, "only I thought I'd just come in and put matters right."

"Put what matters right?"

"Well, you see, I thought that after the wrastle you might think that I bore malice."

"I assure you," said Jack, "that I haven't thought about it at all."

"Jiminy, you don't say so!" exclaimed young Slideaway, in an ecstasy of admiration. "Lor', now, just like you Britishers—so blessed cool!"

"Well, is that all you have to say?"

"No. I want you and I to be on soft ground together—to be chummy like."

"I make very few friends," said Jack, "as I do not stay in one place very long."

"But while you are here," said Slideaway, junior, with an oily smile, "you can make yourself agreeable?"

"I endeavour to do so."

"In a way you do, but you ain't festive with it, and we people of Maple Mountain are a festive folk."

"Very," said Jack, with a dry smile.

"We ain't merry; our rejoicings are quiet," said young Slideaway, "and most of 'em take the form of tea with grog and 'bacca to foller."

"That's all very nice for those who care for it," said Jack.

"Which you don't," said Slideaway, junior, with his head on one side like a meditative raven.

"No, I cant say I do."

"That's bad, for I'm here to ask you

to come to tea to-night, and spend the evening with me and daddy."

"Much obliged," replied Jack, "but it's out of my line."

"But can't you run in our line for once?"

"No, indeed."

"Then how about those three chaps that are with you?"

"You can ask two of them when they return," said Jack; "the other is gone for good."

"Lor', now," said Slideaway, junior, with a lengthened face, "he was in a hurry."

"He's gone, and that's enough," said Jack, abruptly. "When Ben and Stumby come back, you can ask them to tea."

"And you won't object to their coming?"

"Not in the least."

Slideaway, junior, was shining with oiliness now.

He smiled horribly, and rubbed his hands together as he put another question—

"And perhaps you'll kind o' persuade 'em to come, me and daddy being so lonely?"

"Very well," said Jack, impatiently, "they shall come."

Slideaway left the room, and put himself outside the house. There in the snow he executed a dance that might have been performed by a clogged bear, and chuckled like a pig let loose in a potato-field.

"Just what I reckoned," he said. "If I'd settled it all myself it couldn't have been done better."

Returning home, he found his father sitting over the fire, smoking his pipe.

With his nose down near his knees, and his feet curled up under the chair, he looked like an aged candidate for the still open office of the missing link.

"Well, Slidey?" he said, without looking up or moving.

"It's done, daddy—it's done," replied Slideaway, junior; "and Jerek Grittle promised you to come, didn't he?"

"Jerek never turns his back on good wittles," said the old man.

"So he'll be alone," said Slideaway, junior, with glee, "and if they can't settle him then, he's got somebody with horns and a tail at his back."

An hour later, this promising young man was sneaking down Maple Mountain, casting backward glances as he went, and not losing sight of the door of Jerek Grittle's house until it could no longer be seen.

"All right," he muttered, "but I suspected as he would be out afore this."

He plunged into a copse at the foot of the mountain, a little out of the beaten track, and went boldly forward until he reached the plain.

There Makepeace Jibber, crouching behind a huge stone, was awaiting him.

"You are a little late, young man," he said.

"Couldn't come afore," said Slideaway, junior, "as I wanted everything to be complete afore we started. It's all arranged."

"Everything?"

"Yes, everything. Daddy got the stuff to liven them chaps, and as soon as they are off, I'll come out and jine you."

"And we can come along as soon as it's dark?"

"Surely. He's in the house near the three big maples. Old Jerek took the best pigs when he came to this market."

"But there are others beside yourselves in the drum?" said Makepeace Jibber.

"About a score men," replied Slideaway, junior.

"Wal, how do they stand with this eternal enemy of ours?" asked Jibber, fixing a penetrating look on his companion's face.

"No way—neither for nor against," replied Slideaway, junior; "they will all be indoors, and most of 'em in bed. We are an airy people."

"But if there's a rumpus? How then?" asked Jibber.

"Swear that you've got authority to take him, and they'll cave in."

"There must be no miss about it this time," said Makepeace Jibber, "or

the Bowie Boys will rile up against me."

"Is that so?" said Slideaway.

"It is; they don't take kindly to the business. There ain't neither pleasure nor profit in it, they says. They are dead ag'in useless risk."

"It's a fool's game," assented Slideaway, junior.

"And that chap who got his money back—he's still with you, of course," said Makepeace Jibber.

He referred to Daniel Smollet, and Slideaway, junior, thought it prudent to conceal the truth.

"I left him up yonder," he said, giving his head a backward jerk.

"It riled us frightful," said Jibber, "to be robbed of our hard-earned money. Our business is risky, and it ought to be well paid for."

"So it ought," said Slideaway, junior, "so it ought."

"Already the Bowie Boys are getting known, and they've numbered and priced us," said Jibber.

"You don't say so," said Slideaway, junior, "and the price is good, I'll bet."

"There's four thousand dollars on us as a body, and two hundred for every man. It's not a bad price, but we'll run it up higher, by-and-by."

"I'll bet you will," said young Slideaway, with a nod that was full of meaning. "Wal, I must return to see how things are going on. You'll come?"

"Never fear us," said Jibber, savagely. "I'm sweet on putting an end to that young beggar. As for the others, I expect you to finish them off."

"What am I to do?" asked young Slideaway, faintly.

"You've got a bowie. When they are hoccussed, use it. Here's the safest place," and Jibber, with a wink, passed a finger across his throat.

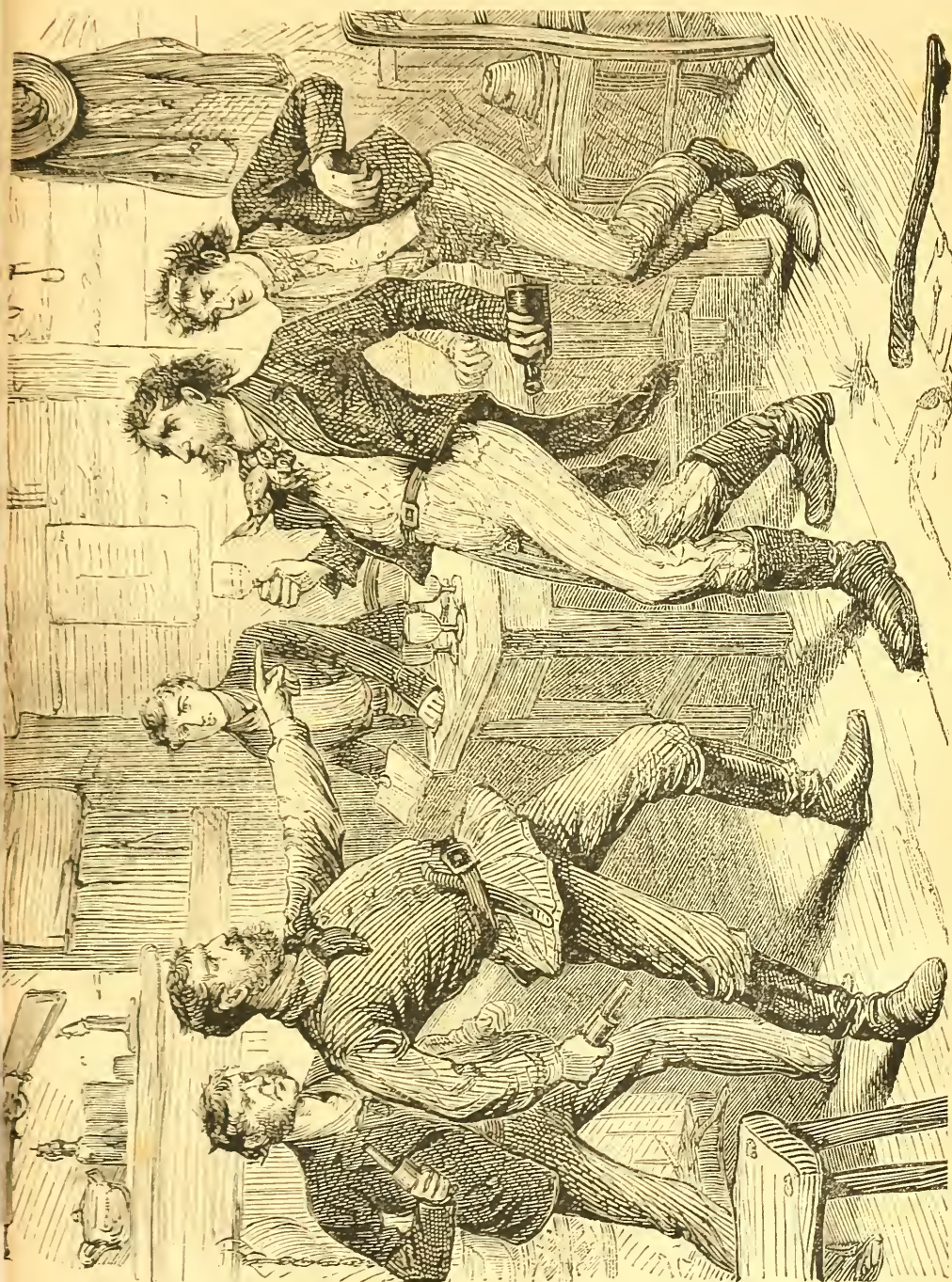
Young Slideaway shuddered.

He had not reckoned on this, having, in his mental arrangements, apportioned all the murderous work to the Bowie Boys.

"Must it be done?" he asked.

"It's the only way to secure safety," was the answer.

Young Slideaway went up the mountain less buoyant than he came down. Matters did not look quite so rosy.



"'DRINK, I SAY!' CRIED JACOB STURMBY."

Slideaway wanted revenge, and to get it cheap. If the Bowie Boys did all the killing, the blood of the slain would be on their heads, and that was just what this promising young man wished them to do.

There was not much law in Maple Mountain, but Judge Lynch sat on the bench in extreme cases. Then the trial, sentence, and execution was generally over in half-an-hour.

"And if they suspected me," thought young Slideaway, "they would make a very short job of it indeed."

The fact was that Jack had become a bit of a favourite with the little community in Maple Mountain, although Slideaway, junior, had declared otherwise.

They were a rough people, but they had some heart in them, and liked the brave, handsome young fellow who sojourned in their midst.

He did not mix much with them, but when he did, he was quietly genial and kind. He was an especial favourite with the women—old and young.

And this Slideaway Bunks knew.

Therefore he desired the Bowie Boys to do all the killing.

It would not be enough for them to take Jack's life. They must take the lives of Jack's friends also.

After the deed was done, Slideaway Bunks, father and son, intended to be as indignant as anybody.

But now there was a little hitch in the business.

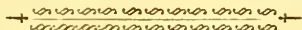
Young Slideaway had been requested to join in, and he dared not refuse.

"I've mixed myself up with that lot," he thought, as he entered his house, "and I must go on. But blarm me if I don't wish now that I'd taken this hole in my head more kindly, and not gone on with the business."

But regrets now were useless; he had gone too far to retreat, and must take his chance of success, or pay the penalty of failure.

And the penalty of his villainy, what would that be?

As Slideaway asked himself this question, he shuddered violently, and experienced a dread sinking at his heart.



CHAPTER XLV.

THE SHADOWS GATHER, AND THE PLOT THICKENS—THE FATAL MOMENT AT HAND.

THERE was elation among the Bowie Boys.

Their master, Makepeace Jibber, had addressed them on the prospect of their coming expedition, and their expectations were very rosy.

"The pile of dollars we were robbed of," he said, "we shall get back, and we shall likewise stop that enterprising young party from performing a similar trick."

Early in the evening they were all ready to move towards Maple Mountain, and he began to dispatch them by twos and threes.

The appointed place for the final muster was the stone at the foot of the mountain, where he met young Slideaway earlier in the day.

In a little time they were all on the road. It was growing dusk, and Jibber and the Swaggerer brought up the rear.

"I want to make a proposal to you,

Jibber," said the Swaggerer, "and bind myself to give an extra month's pay."

"Wal," drawled Jibber, "pour it out."

"This boy—this Jack Boldheart," hissed the Swaggerer, "I want to finish him myself. I sha'n't rest easy unless I take his life."

"Then take it," said Jibber, laconically.

"I don't think I can do it alone," said the Swaggerer, "he's such a con-founded eel. When you get him down, you and your men could hold him for a minute while I look in his eyes and say something!"

Jibber laughed contemptuously.

"I understand now," he said, "how that young fellow got his hold over you."

"Do you?"

"Yes; there's no real bottom—no root to you. I can be funky at times,

but durn me if you can't at that game give me a mile start and beat me hollow."

"You don't know what you are talking about," muttered the Swaggerer.

"I know that there's some deuced black business between you and that lad," said Jibber, "but I don't want to injure you on that ground. I'll keep my contract. Honesty is a sight the best policy."

"No doubt," sneered the Swaggerer.

"Go straight, is my motto," said Jibber, "and I'll be straight with you now. When this job is done, and you've worked your time out, you and your lot just make tracks—do you hear?"

"I hear," growled the Swaggerer.

They said no more, but walked in silence to the appointed place, the Swaggerer sullen, and Makepeace Jibber smiling, like a man who had acquitted himself honourably, and finds his conscience approving.

Having counted his men over, and found all there, he gave the word, and they went quietly and stealthily up the mountain.

Meanwhile Slideaway Bunks, father and son, had been busy getting tea ready, and preparing for their guests.

They put a big tea-pot, holding about half a gallon, and a very respectable ham, on the board, and Slideaway, senior, cut some tea-cakes in two, and was toasting them at the fire, when the expected guests came in.

Now Jacob Sturmby had never liked the ways of the two Bunks, and he had no faith in their sincerity.

When Jack told him of the invitation, he said—

"What does it mean? They have a game in hand."

But Jack simply smiled and said "Go," and they went as desired.

On entering the room, Jacob's keen eyes took in the preparations, from the tea-cakes being toasted, to a bottle of whisky, uncorked, that stood on a little table at the back.

The latter he took particular notice of, and resolved to inspect it closer before he tasted it.

"Wal, this is a ra-al treat," said old Bunks, putting down the toasting-fork, and holding out both hands; "we are highly honoured, ain't we, Slidey?"

"I reckon," replied the promising young man, "we sha'n't forget this night in a hurry."

"I hope not," said Jacob, as he detected a glance exchanged by father and son, and became convinced that some plot was in process of being worked out.

Slideaway, junior, having given him greeting, sidled out of the room for a few minutes, to get logs for the fire.

He was in reality going to see if there were any of his accomplices approaching.

"That's a good son, mine," said old Slideaway.

"Seems so," said Jacob.

Ben blinked at the fire, but said nothing.

"He's everything to me," sighed old Slideaway, "'specially since his mother died."

"Been dead long?" asked Jacob.

"Seventeen years come Christmas," replied old Slideaway. "Ah, he's a good boy. I'll just go and help him with the logs."

He joined his promising son outside.

"See anything of them, Slidey?" he asked.

"No; toodark—but they are coming."

"Then we may begin tea?"

"Yes, peg away."

They went and found their guests seated at the fire, making themselves very much at home.

Old Ben was going on with the toast.

Jacob Sturmby had, however, taken a sniff at the whisky, and whispered to Ben—

"Hocussed!"

"What for?" asked the amazed old man.

"Don't know; but we shall see soon. When they ask us to drink, you do as I do."

"All right, I'll keep my eyes open, never fear."

"Now I do like to see this," said old Slideaway; "taking up the toast is friendly."

"It's the last piece," said Ben.

"Then eat it right away," said Slideaway, junior, "and make it the first."

They sat down to tea, and the old man poured out. When he had drunk

some, Jacob drank his, so with all eatables also.

He let them make a start, and then followed.

Ben followed him.

It was as strange a meal as ever four civilised people partook of.

But neither old nor young Slideaway saw anything peculiar in it. They were so satisfied with the success of their cunning plot that they failed to watch the enemy.

Tea was over, and the old man began to clear away, the young one, after a minute, helping him.

They went in and out, talking in their most lively strain, and as soon as the table was cleared, young Slideaway took another look outside.

All had gone well. The Bowie Boys had arrived, and were gathered in a dark cluster under the four maple trees in front of Jerek Grittle's house.

Jerek himself had not been able to come to tea. He was laid up with a sudden attack of rheumatism.

That was the message he sent in the afternoon.

"As good a thing as could happen," said old Slideaway. "He won't be able to interfere, and we shall save a tea.

What's the good of throwing wittles away on dead men?"

Young Slideaway moved over to the maple trees and joined Makepeace Jibber, who stood at the head of his men.

"All is gone slick and easy," he said. "As soon as I go in, you may begin to close round the house. When I come out again, go in and finish him."

"It's as good as done," said Makepeace Jibber.

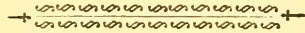
And while they thus conversed, Jack sat quietly by the fire reading. He was not troubled with any doubts or fears like Jacob, and had no suspicion of treachery.

Jerek Grittle lay on his couch in the other room, but his rheumatism could not have been very bad.

Rheumatism makes people wince and groan, and he was doing neither.

Slideaway, junior, went indoors again, and silent as shadows the Bowie Boys gathered round the house. Six, with Makepeace Jibber, stood by the door awaiting the signal to rush in.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the night. Every ear was stretched, and the eyes of all were upon the door from which Slideaway, junior, was expected to emerge.



CHAPTER XLVI.

THE BITERS BITTEN—MAKEPEACE JIBBER MAKES TRACKS TO ANOTHER COUNTRY.

"TEA is a woman's drink," said Slideaway, senior, moving towards the little table. "It don't suit men unless they have a drop of whisky after it."

He turned round and leered like a knowing old toper.

Jacob Sturmby nodded his head and smiled.

The moment had come for him to see clearly what game was afoot.

"Slidey," continued the old man, "put out four glasses. We have jest four left out of the dozen that your dear mother brought up the mountain."

"Here they are, daddy," said young Slideaway, endeavouring to speak jovially.

But his voice came hot and hoarse through his dry lips, and the glasses

jingled tremulously as he set them down.

Slideaway, senior, filled them up.

And he was nervous, too, for he poured some over the edge of the glasses upon the table.

"My eyes are bad," he said, "and I can't see so clear as I used to do."

He raised his glass, and looked at his guests with a sickly smile.

"Let us drink to each other," he said.

The eyes of Jacob Sturmby were upon him.

"Drink away," he said.

"It's usual for visitors here to drink first," said the old man, faintly.

"By heaven!" cried Jacob, suddenly producing his revolver, "you shall drink first! Cover the young 'un, Ben."

Old Ben, prompt in imitation, had already done so.

Father and son stood appalled, white to the lips, and the blood frozen in their veins.

"Drink, I say!" cried Jacob.

"It's a strange way of treating people who fed you at their table," began the old man.

"Drink, I say!" cried Jacob.

"I won't!" yelled Slideaway, senior, and turning, he would have fled.

One step only he took, and Jacob fired. The old man, with a gasp, fell writhing on the ground.

The next moment his son, brought down by Ben, fell at his side.

A shout was heard without, and Jacob dashed to the door.

"The chief mischief's here," he cried; "never mind them two, Ben. Follow me."

He threw the door open, and ran out. A glance showed him the foe at work.

The sound of the revolvers had been taken by them as a call, and they were trying to break in the door of Jerek Grittle's hut.

But that astute individual was prepared for them.

He and Jacob both suspected the two Bunks, and they had put their heads together to see what ought to be done.

It was decided that he should have fictitious rheumatism, and stop at home while they went to Bunks' tea-party to see what was moving.

Jerek Grittle had barricaded the door, and, with an auger, drilled a hole in it.

Through this hole he watched the enemy gather, and when they made their attack, he popped a rifle through it and fired.

Makepeace Jibber was within the line of that fire, and, with a shriek, he fell, rolling over and over in agony.

The bullet had gone clean through him, and entered the heart of one of his men, who simply fell upon his face, and lay still and dead.

This severe rebuff was so sudden that the marauders were staggered, and stood still for a moment in mute terror and amazement.

Then Jacob and Ben, burning with fury, came in among them, and then nine of the Bowie Boys speedily measured their length upon the ground.

So much was done when the door of Jerek Grittle's hut was thrown open, and Jack, with his weapons ready, a revolver in each hand, came into the moonlight.

Behind him was Jerek Grittle, with his rifle at the present.

Their appearance was enough, and the foe, already disheartened and dismayed, turned and fled down the mountain.

Jerek Grittle's rifle cracked, and one more man rolled over.

The rest succeeded in making good their escape.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Jack, addressing Jacob.

"It's infernal treachery," replied Jacob; "the two Bunks were in it."

"I thought so," said Grittle, as he put a fresh cartridge into his rifle, "bile me if I didn't."

"They tried to hocus us, and those men were to murder you, dear boy."

"You can tell me all about it by-and-by," said Jack; "let us see who we have here."

They looked at the men who were near them. They were all dead; none of Jack's three foes were among them.

"There's another lower down," said Ben, "and he's alive."

It was Makepeace Jibber who had rolled on until a log stopped him. As they went up to him he tried to raise his arm.

"Don't shoot," he said, feebly; "I've got my gruel."

Behind Jack and his friends the amazed and alarmed inhabitants had now gathered. Everybody was asking questions, and nobody was answering them, when Jack's voice was heard.

"Be quiet for a minute," he said; "I want to hear what this man has to say."

"I can't say much," said Makepeace Jibber, when silence had been obtained. "I'm done for. I only wish to die as I am."

"Who and what are you?" asked Jack.

"The leader of the Bowie Boys."

"Is the Swaggerer with your men?"

"He is, and curse the day I do when he came among us. Is he shot?"

"No."

"That's a fool's question! He'll have

an ending more suited to him. Will somebody shift my head a little, please. I've been a despicable villain all my life, but now I'm a dying man."

Jack raised him up a little, and put him into an easier position.

Makepeace Jibber smiled faintly.

"That's the first real kind act I've had done for me since I was a child—and it's the last."

He closed his eyes for a few moments, and breathed so softly that they thought he was dead, but he opened his eyes again, and looked at Jack.

"You are a brave lad," he said, "and the luck's with you. Nature loads the dice for some people, and throw them how they may, they get nothing but sixes. I've had loaded dice, too, but the deuce has been in every throw. The game's up."

And then he closed his eyes, shuddered, and lay still.

"He is dead," said Jack, rising from a kneeling position beside the dead man. "In life he was a great rascal, but we must not deny him a grave. Jacob, where are the two Bunks?"

"I left them on the floor," replied Jacob, laconically.

"Were they dead?"

"I don't know."

"We had better see."

They went up, Jack, and Jacob, and Ben, while Jerek Grittle and his neighbours lingered behind, Jerek explaining matters to his indignant hearers.

Old Slideaway was dead. He had paid the full penalty of his treachery, but his son was still living.

Nor was he indeed very severely wounded, Ben having shot him just below the knee in the fleshy part of the leg.

The wound, however, was sufficiently painful, and they found him gasping and howling as he crawled about the room.

When Jack showed himself in the doorway, he fell upon his knees and clasped his hands.

"Mercy!" he cried.

"Do you expect any?" said Jack, with a cold smile, "you double traitor and miserable cur!"

"I think, Master Jack," said Jacob, "that you may safely leave him to his neighbours and friends."

They were approaching, and the murmurs reached the wretched Slideaway's ears. He shook horribly.

"They'll hang me," he said, hoarsely; "save me—save me!"

"What shall I do, Sturmby?" asked Jack; "it was but one life they attempted."

"Leave him to his neighbours, I say," said Jacob.

"I will," replied Jack, "on one condition."

"What is that?"

"You shall hear it in a moment."

They were at the door now, a crowd of angry men and women, calling for the two Slideaways—father and son—to be given to them.

Jack stood between them and the quivering traitor, holding up his hand for silence. By degrees the noise subsided and he spoke.

"One of the men you seek is dead," he said; "he cannot come to you."

"Which is it?" they cried.

"The old man."

"Out with the other!" "Pitch him out!" "Toss him here!"

Those and other cries rang in the ears of the terrified Slideaway, junior, as he lay grovelling on the floor.

"Patience, my friends, patience," said Jack; "you shall have your man on one condition."

"What is it?" they asked.

"That you spare his life."

A howl of dissent answered him, and some were pressing forward, and he bade them keep back.

"Hear me," he said; "it is my life that has been attempted, and it's for me to be prosecutor. I will not have him killed, but I will put my mark upon him. Can any among you tattoo?"

A dozen voices answered—

"Yes!"

"Then write 'Cur' upon his forehead," said Jack, "and let him go."

The proposition was received with acclamation, and they were rushing forward again, when Jack pointed to the old man.

"Not here," he said. "The dead, if it is never so vile when living, demands our respect. He shall be brought out to you. Jacob, help him outside."

"They will murder me," said Slideaway, junior, writhing in agony.

"I can't help that," said Jacob, as he raised him up. "I've my orders to carry out. Ben, give me a hand with this sack of cowardice."

They took him out, and the crowd bore him away, howling wrathfully, and his shrieks echoed in the night air.

"Perhaps I was wrong to trust them," said Jack, on his return to his own place.

"It was a mistake to let him live, Master Jack," said Jacob. "If we find a p'ison-snake, we don't paint his tail and let him go."

"You think he may be dangerous by-and-by?"

"He might be."

"I'll risk it," said Jack. "I think he has had enough of me, and will not come in my way again."

Slideaway, junior, did not suffer the extreme penalty of the law, nor did he leave Maple Mountain for some days.

He was kept a prisoner for two or three days after the dead were buried. But one morning he was told to go.

With his hat over his eyes, and a limping gait, he sneaked through the place, followed by the derisive cheers of the people.

Jacob stood at the door when he went by, and marked well the expression of his face.

Speaking to Jack a little later on, he said—

"I don't think I should have spared the young viper. He's got a powerful poison in him."

"You think so, Jacob," said Jack; "but you and I need not fear it."

"I don't fear it, Master Jack; but it is well not to run unnecessary risks."

"They tattooed him, did they?"

"Deep—and something more."

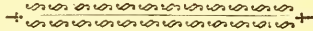
"What is that?"

"They've slit his ears for him," said Jacob. "I tried to stop 'em, but they told me to dry up, as they felt bound to do something on their own account."

"He deserved as much," said Jack, "and we will not quarrel with our friends on that score."

"I wouldn't have quarrelled with 'em if they had shot him like a wolf," returned Jacob, "and I say it's a pity they didn't do it. He's a cur, but dangerous. Marik me, Master Jack, we shall hear more of him."

But Jack only smiled, and, saying it was late, retired to his room.



CHAPTER XLVII.

THE SCATTERED BAND—A TERRIBLE TIME FOR ROGUES.

BROKEN up and dispirited, the Bowie Boys fled, and ere they had reached the foot of the mountain they had instinctively divided into two parties.

One was composed of the remnant of Makepeace Jibber's followers, and the other of the Swaggerer, Panther, and Sneezer.

"Hold back," said the Swaggerer, softly; "we must cut these fellows now."

"I reckon they will not thank us for this," replied the Panther. "What a horrible mess we've made of it!"

"I suppose that Slideaway Bunks sold us," said the Sneezer. "Oh, scissors! what luck we have—atchew!"

"It don't matter much how it came about," said the Swaggerer, gloomily, as he stopped running; "but I don't think Bunks sold us. What good could there be in such a fool's trick? He

muddled it, that's all. Listen, Panther, you've good ears—are they coming?"

"No, they've stopped," said the Panther, savagely, "and for the present we are safe—if we can keep clear of the Bowie Boys."

"Jibber's got his quietus. I saw him fall," said the Swaggerer.

"Good job, too," said the Panther. "I was beginning to hate the fellow. Now, Swaggerer, we must do something, and what is it to be?"

"Make tracks for Nevada, and see if we can do anything in the silver mines."

"That's not a bad idea."

"It's no use," said the Sneezer. "We shall never get there."

"We are three together still," replied the Swaggerer, "and union is strength. While there's life there's hope, and let us stick to each other."

The Sneezer, who was nearly worn out with fatigue and excitement, sat down and covered his face with his hands.

The Swaggerer saw something trickling through his fingers.

"Here, curse me!" he said, "if the fool ain't crying! Come out of it, Sneezer, you duffer!"

"You let me alone," replied the Sneezer. "I'll cry, howl, bark, or sneeze, just as I please."

"None of your mutiny," said the Panther, "or I'll shake it out of you."

And as a sample of what he would do, he gave the Sneezer a shake that confused him utterly for the next quarter of an hour.

"It's a long way to Nevada," said the Swaggerer, "but it's a big country when we get there, and there's as good a chance of hiding there as anywhere—perhaps better."

"We'll get on, anyway," said the Panther. "Catch hold of this fool's arm. I'll take one. He's saddle-headed."

"You've mixed him up a bit," said the Swaggerer, as he laid hold of the other arm.

"Stop a minute," said the Sneezer, gazing vacantly about him. "We won't go to the scaffold just yet, as the executioner isn't ready. He's in the bar having a drop of drink with Captain Boldheart, and—"

"Come on, will you?" hissed the Swaggerer, as he dragged him forward.

"But it isn't fair to go away without leave," said the Sneezer; "the captain will expect us to wait until he's washed the blood off his face. You hit him hard."

"Shut up, will you!" cried the Panther and Swaggerer together. "Keep yourself together, will you? Can't you tell where you are?"

But the Sneezer could not, and he continued to ramble on in this fashion for some time, but at last he became more like himself again, and they all three skulked along silently side by side.

Skulked and walked, for they dreaded not only the bold lad they had left on Maple Mountain, but the defeated and infuriated Bowie Boys.

To fall among them now was certain death.

They grew weary, but dare not rest until the Sneezer fell down, and declared he could go no farther.

Then they sat down gloomily by his side, and, shivering and cursing, watched for the dawn.

Ere it came, the Sneezer was awake again, and slightly delirious.

He was coherent at times, but his wits for the most part wandered, and as he in that condition persisted in talking of the "Albatross," and what had been done aboard, he nearly drove his companions frantic.

"What shall we do with him?" the Swaggerer asked.

"I'll settle him," growled the Panther, drawing his knife.

"No, no," remonstrated the other, "we won't kill an old pal. It would bring a double curse upon us."

"The little chap died bravely," said the Sneezer, who stood a little apart from them; "he never funk'd to the last. I saw him when the sharks came up, and his eyes were steady to the last. I don't know that it wasn't a merciful end for him, all things considered."

"I can't stand it," said the Swaggerer; "if he goes on in this way I shall go mad."

"Let me settle him," said the Panther.

"No, no, we'll leave him. Sneezer, will you stop here a little time for us? We sha'n't be long."

"I'll stop," the Sneezer answered.

"Then we'll get along."

They left him, and got out of sight of him in half-an-hour.

All day they walked hard, and at night lay down by some trees to rest.

It was bitterly cold, and the only shelter they had was the trunk of a fallen tree.

But it was something, and, worn and weary, they slept.

The Swaggerer was the first to awake. A hand was passed over his face, and he leaped up.

It was dark still, but he could see a third figure near him.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Me," replied the Sneezer. "You kept me waiting so long that I was tired, and came on."

He spoke quite rationally, and had apparently got over his delirium.

"You can stop with us," said the

Swaggerer, "if you don't give us any jaw about the 'Albatross.'"

"I'm not likely to talk about that," said the Sneezer, shuddering.

He did not recollect anything he had talked of in his delirium.

The Panther, on awaking, was not in a very good humour, and he would have stopped the Sneezer's journeying with him, but for the Swaggerer.

He stood between them, not because he was merciful, but because he was afraid.

He had a superstitious dread of killing any of his accomplices.

If he could have secured his own safety by betraying or murdering both, he would not have hesitated a moment.

They moved on again, hungry, cold, and wretched.

Their path lay through a wood now, if, indeed, it could be said that they had a path at all.

It was a wild, dreary wood of huge leafless trees, that offered them no sustenance.

"How long can we stand this?" asked the Swaggerer, as another night drew on.

"About another day will settle me," replied the Panther.

The Sneezer was bad again, and began to ramble as before.

The Panther was now too weak for violence, and let him talk on.

It was an awful companionship for the two greater rascals.

Like an emissary from Nemesis, the shivering, delirious Sneezer babbled of the dark and deadly crimes they had shared in.

He talked of treachery, of ghastly wounds, of vain appeals for mercy, of one and all the victims, from Captain Boldheart to the kind-hearted, bereaved settler whom they had murdered for his money.

"We know you did it, the Pantaloon and I," he said; "we heard him pray, and struggle, and fall groaning."

They walked, or rather, tottered, on ahead of him, hoping to get clear away, but they could not.

As they lost strength, he seemed to gain it, and kept at their heels without apparent effort.

Like an avenging spirit he dogged them.

Like men who have a goal to reach, and must reach it or die, they plodded on.

And yet it seemed as if their only goal was the grave.

They all halted that night. The wood was passed by many miles, and they lay down upon the plain.

The frost had broken, and the snow was melting—on a watery bed they slept.

But it did not kill them.

Men under excitement will bear incredible things. The British troops slept in mud on the night before the Battle of Waterloo, but they arose and won the day.

These trio of knaves were fighting, too.

They were fighting for their lives.

"I could eat a skunk," was the remark of the Panther, when he arose stiff and sore in the morning.

"A mouldy biscuit and a piece of salt junk as hard as a cable would be a feast for an emperor," the Swaggerer said.

The Sneezer had nothing to say, but he licked his dry lips, and looked volumes of hunger.

They started again, and all were silent now. The Sneezer was no longer delirious, but simply almost lifeless.

His action was merely mechanical, but strange to say it was stronger than the movements of the others.

They tottered and reeled at every step, but he kept upright and straight close behind them.

Noon came, and a sun, warm for a wintry one, shone upon them. Suddenly the Sneezer cried—

"I see another wood and a hut."

"I see nothing," groaned the Swaggerer, "but a blank wall before me."

"And the flames of the bottomless pit are dancing before my eyes," hissed the Panther.

"The Sneezer sees the mirage," rejoined the Swaggerer.

But they went on and found that he was right. A wood was not far off, and the hut was there, too.

Still doubting, but feeling that disappointment would kill him, the Swaggerer forged on ahead, knocked at the door, and fell in a heap against it.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE END OF A WEARY JOURNEY—AN UNEXPECTED RECOGNITION—TWO NOTABLE YARNS.

A big ruffianly-looking man responded to the knock, and dragged back a rudely constructed door.

It had no hinges, and was little more than a shutter, and as he drew it away he propped it against the inner wall.

"Who's this?" he said; "we don't take in drunken people here. This isn't a lock-up."

"Bread, water!" gasped the Swaggerer.

The man looked at him, then at the other two forlorn wretches behind him, and an exclamation escaped his lips.

"Shiver my bones!" he said. "How did you find me out?"

It was Jim Black, the Settler.

But they knew him not, and in a moment he saw that chance had brought them thither.

"Bread—bread!" they all cried, and their voices sounded like the rattling of dry bones.

He smiled grimly, and drew the Swaggerer in. The others followed, and he replaced the door, and put a heavy bar of wood against it.

"A drop of something first," he said.

He fetched a big leathern bottle, rudely made out of some animal's skin, and tilted some of the contents into a tin cup.

It was fiery whisky, and he gave them a little each.

"Drink light, my hearties," he said; "you have empty barrels, and we must be careful."

The drink revived them all, but they did not know him in the dim light that a small window afforded until the Swaggerer got upon his feet.

"Whoever you are," he said, "accept the thanks of a man who was dying."

"Don't you know me?" said Jim Black. "I'm an old pal of yours. Here, let me stand by the window. Now look."

They knew him then, and a panic came upon them.

They drew back and huddled together against the opposite wall.

"I'm no ghost," he grinned. "I'm Jim Black in the flesh. I've a body, and I've bones."

"Then he didn't kill you?" said the Swaggerer, drawing a deep breath.

"I deuced near killed him," replied Jim, with a braggadocio air. "Have another drop, and then something to eat, and afterwards I'll tell you all about it."

He put some coarse food before them, and they ate greedily until he removed it.

"Not too much at first," he said, "now a little more drink and a pipe. While we smoke we will exchange yarns."

Jim Black had but one rough seat in the hut, but there was a good fire, and the floor, though of earth, was hard and dry. It was a couch of down to the weary wanderers.

"Your story first," said the Swaggerer, as he stretched himself at ease, "and then I'll tell mine."

"All right," said Jim Black.

Then began what might be called a liars' competition, and a game of brag with big cards on both sides.

According to Jim Black, Jack and he had fought, and Jack, after the first shot, had run away.

"He missed, you see," said the Settler, "and then seeing I was ready for him, he bolted."

"You've hurt your hand somehow," said the Panther.

"I've had a fall," he replied, "and broke some of the knuckles. The fingers are twisted a bit, but I can use it."

He resumed his story, and journeyed for a while in the land of truth.

It seemed that he had wandered inland at first alone, but afterwards fell in with an exploring party who were on the lookout for anything that promised money.

"We are looking for gold," he said, "but we sha'n't turn up our noses at silver."

"But you are alone now?" said the Swaggerer.

"Only for a few days. They've gone on and left me in charge of the hut. I've to hunt, and get in some provisions, and I've got a tidy stock of dried buffaloe in the next room."

"And when do you expect them back?"

"Maybe to-day, to-morrow, next week, or not at all, there's no knowing," he said. "Now tell me your yarn."

The Swaggerer, unlike him, began with the truth, and told the story of the sinking of the "Rattlesnake," at which Jim Black laughed hugely.

"That was neatly done, and worthy of you," he said; "lor', how I should have enjoyed it."

Then the Swaggerer went on to say that they had seen Jack in New York, and as they were travelling with a large party, he had been able to follow them, and pick off the Pantaloon.

"The old man would dawdle behind," he said, "and it served him right."

"But where's your party?" asked Jim Black.

"Gone exploring, like yours."

"And they left you behind?"

"Yes, and as they didn't show up we followed and got abroad. We had lost our way when we found you."

"A lucky find!"

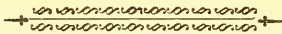
"Lucky all round," the Swaggerer said, exultingly; "what a set of fools we have been to be afraid of that cub. Jim, old man, I'm proud of you."

It was strange, but each liar believed the other, and drew some consolation from the presumed discovery that Jack was not so formidable as they had believed him to be.

The whisky passed round, and they were soon boasting and bragging. Even the Sneezer got bold, and talked of "taking a stroll outside to see if that cub was about," but drunk or sober he was too cautious to run such a risk.

So they drank, and boasted, and laughed, and sang until they one by one stretched themselves on the floor, and sank into a sodden sleep.

Brief triumph this. Already Maple Mountain had lost its young hero, and Jack and his two faithful followers had taken up the trail.



CHAPTER XLIX.

THE NEW COURSE—IN SIGHT OF THE LAND OF SILVER—THE SNEEZER WARNED.

JIM BLACK's friends, wherever they might be, did not turn up during the next two days, but this did not trouble him much. He and his old companions were on excellent terms with each other, and their future plans were laid.

"To Nevada!" was their watchword, and on the morning of the third day they set out.

The Sneezer was made light porter for the party, and carried on his back the skin of whisky and some rough cooking utensils. He grumbled, of course, but he muttered to adder ears.

A sense of elation was upon the Swaggerer.

Jim Black's story had, as it were, set him up again. He was amazed at his previous cowardice, and felt, as the saying goes, "as bold as brass."

He now tried to persuade himself that he was anxious to meet Jack, and bring

matters to an issue, but that was all nonsense.

In the depths of his heart the old cowardice, the bully's curse, still nestled.

It was a long journey they had before them, but they entered upon it with a light heart. All had arms, and Jim Black had been very liberal with a store of ammunition he had been left in charge of.

"And not far from here," he said, "game is plentiful."

This proved to be the case, and they lived well. The weather became milder, and the snow disappeared. The brief winter was gone.

On their way they met with travellers returning. Some were miners from California or Nevada, and some Mormons on their way to preach to benighted people who found one wife sufficient.

One elder they met spent a jovial

night with them, and when he had fallen asleep, they rifled his pockets, and walked off with his dollars.

"We may want them," said the Swaggerer, "and stopping his journey is no sin."

For three weeks they kept on, and each day found them with gathering courage. It was the old story over again.

At last a line of mountains appeared in the horizon, and Jim Black told them that beyond lay Nevada.

"We'll camp by 'em to-night," he said, "and move through the Great Gap to-morrow. Then we can begin to look about us."

They laughed with glee, and, as they walked along, sang coarse songs, which they had picked up in Makepeace Jibber's saloon in New York.

And none enjoyed better spirits than the Sneezer.

He had a voice like a cracked fiddle, and he gave his friends a pretty dose of it. As he only knew one song it soon became monotonous.

"I'll hit you over the head if you open your mouth with that song again," growled the Swaggerer; "what the deuce have you to do with the 'Young May Moon'?"

"I didn't write the song," urged the Sneezer, "and I suppose there is such a thing as a young May moon—occasionally."

"We don't want it here," said the Swaggerer, and the vocalisation of the Sneezer ceased.

But he was cheerful—very cheerful, and when they stopped for the night, he skipped about as he made the cooking arrangements.

He had arranged everything when it occurred to him that he wanted water for the boiler.

"And I don't see any," he said.

"You are sure to find a spring down the gorge yonder," said Jim Black; "go and look for it."

The Sneezer facetiously shouldered the boiler as if it had been a mighty burden, and went off humming the tune that had so exasperated the Swaggerer.

He plunged into the gorge, and disappeared.

They waited nearly half-an-hour, and he did not return. Then they began to

mutter and heap anathemas on his head.

"We sha'n't have supper to-night."

"Perhaps there's no water."

"Plenty," said Jim Black, "I can tell the signs of it. He's found it not a quarter of a mile down."

"What's he stopping for, then?" said the Panther. "I'll go and see."

With his pipe between his teeth, he lounged away, and was also lost to view.

They waited for him a quarter of an hour, and he did not return. The minutes flew by, and close upon an hour had elapsed since the Sneezer departed, and nothing was seen of him or the Panther.

"What's the meaning of this?" the Swaggerer asked, pale as a spectre.

"Don't know," said Jim Black, with a lowering brow. "You had better go and see."

"Hadn't we better go together?"

"Confound you! If you are afraid to go alone, I'll join you."

The Settler rose from his seat with an angry air, and hurried into the gorge.

"Have your shooter ready," said the Settler, curtly.

"I have it," replied the Swaggerer.

Ere they had gone far, they came in sight of the familiar figures—the Sneezer seated on the ground, and the Panther standing beside him.

No enemy was near, no sound or sign of conflict.

The Settler and the Swaggerer laughed outright.

"I'm going back," said the former.

The Swaggerer, now that there was no visible danger, decided to go on alone.

But as he drew nearer he saw that something was wrong. The Sneezer's face was deathly white, and his eyes glaring. He did not appear to be conscious of the presence of his companion.

"What's the matter with him?" the Swaggerer asked.

"I don't know," replied the Panther.

"I found him as you see him now. I've spoken to him, shaken him, cursed him, but he takes no notice of me."

"To-morrow," said the Sneezer, vacantly, "to-morrow!"

"There, that's how he's been going

on," said the Panther. "'To-morrow, to-morrow,' nothing but 'to-morrow.'"

"Look at me, Sneezer," said the Swaggerer, bending down. "Don't you know who I am?"

"To-morrow," said the Sneezer, in exactly the same way as before.

"It's my opinion," muttered the Panther, "that he's gone daft."

"He's had a shaking of some sort," replied the Swaggerer, an old fear growing upon him. "Perhaps he's seen—him."

"What, here?" asked the Panther, looking at the high, sloping sides of the gorge. "How could he get here, ahead of us?"

"I don't know. If he made up his mind, he would do it."

"To-morrow," murmured the Sneezer. "One more day to live! One—one—one—"

"Now I know," said the Swaggerer, with a shiver. "We have been tracked to this place, and the Sneezer is doomed."

"We'll have it out, then," said the Panther, resolutely. "Let's stick to

him, and the moment the cub appears one of us ought to bring him down."

"Jim Black might," said the Swaggerer, gloomily. "He's got luck on the right side."

"Anyhow," said the Panther, "let to-morrow settle it. He can't kill the Sneezer without our knowing it if we stick to our post, and he can settle us all at once. Let us have a fight for it."

"It is all very well to talk," said the Swaggerer; "but the young beggar is fireproof."

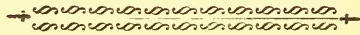
"Bah!" growled the Panther. "Catch hold of the Sneezer. I'll fill the pot with water, and bring it along."

"Come, get up, old man," said the Swaggerer.

The Sneezer got upon his feet very slowly, stared at the sky, and muttered again—

"To-morrow—to-morrow!"

He said no more, but quietly went back to the spot where they were camping, and then lay down beside the fire which Jim Black had been attending to.



CHAPTER L.

THE EVENTFUL DAY—A JOURNEY INTO THE PASS—TRUE TO HIS TRYST.

It was in vain that they tried to get a coherent account of what had transpired from the Sneezer. He was hopelessly bewildered, helplessly lost.

All he said was "To-morrow!" and stared wildly about him.

But, as our readers may guess, he had seen Jack.

The dauntless and determined avenger had kept well upon their trail. If he had lacked information, parties whom he had met supplied him with what he wanted.

Across the plain, through the woods, he came as straight as the others had gone, and in the night periods he headed them, and entered the mountain gorge to await their coming.

Watching from afar, he beheld the Sneezer come in search of water, and he lay close until there were only a few feet between them.

Then he rose and confronted the wretched coward.

The shock to the Sneezer was very great. He could neither move nor speak until Jack had set his seal upon him and gone.

A touch on the forehead, and the words, "I will come for you to-morrow," were all, but how pregnant with horror to the wretched hearer.

He sank on the ground in a sitting position, and staring straight ahead, muttered, "To-morrow," again and again, like one who repeats a sentence of death.

And it was thus the Panther found him.

As nothing lucid could be extracted from him, they left him to himself, and the night coming they sought sleep.

Jim Black, the Settler, and the Panther slept, but the other two lay awake.

At intervals the Sneezer repeated the words so fixed on his memory, and presently they assumed the significance

of a death-knell in the listener's ears.

The gaps of silence between were also terrible to him. They appeared to increase in length, and at times the Swaggerer thought that his doomed comrade must have fallen asleep.

"At last," he would say, and immediately the monotonous words would boom in his ears—

"To-morrow."

The Panther might express disbelief in, or indifference to, this portent, but the Swaggerer was sure that Jack had appeared, and named the coming day for vengeance.

"He is not to be shaken off," he thought, "and he will leave me to the last."

The night passed slowly, wretchedly, wearily. At the first streak of dawn they were all moving.

"We will get on," said the Settler; "a bit of breakfast now, and something more the other side of the pass."

The Swaggerer took his share, but did not eat it; the Sneezer did not even take his.

When the Panther offered him some dried meat, he only said, "To-morrow."

"Curse to-morrow!" hissed the Panther.

"No—to-day, to-day!" cried the Sneezer: "for me it is accursed. I am a doomed man!"

He was speaking more rationally, but the terror was as strong as ever upon him. The Swaggerer asked him what had happened in the gorge on the previous day.

"What matters?" the Sneezer answered; "you will see the end of it soon."

"We will stand by you," said the Panther; "don't be afraid. When the time comes you must fight. Young Jack can't kill the lot."

"But you can do nothing for me," he said. "You could not save the Pantaloon, or Dunmore, or Magson."

"I saved myself," said Jim Black, with a braggart air.

"Perhaps," said the Sneezer.

It was observed by the others that, although terrified so much, the Sneezer gave out none of those nasal outbursts with which they had so long been familiar, and it puzzled them not a little.

It did not occur to these men that there is a terror too great for ordinary expression, as well as a grief too deep for tears.

But so it is, and such a terror was on the Sneezer.

There was only one road open to them if they meant to go on, and that was the pass before them; so they started, the three boastful ruffians ahead, and the Sneezer lagging a little behind them.

He walked with his head down, and the movement was merely mechanical.

Each moment his eyes grew wilder.

His gaze wandered up and down the great slopes of broken rock on either side of him. Each moment he expected Jack to appear.

But an hour passed, and they saw nothing of him.

"It was all fancy," the Swaggerer said.

"You bet ten to one on it," replied Jim Black.

But barely had the words been uttered, when a gasping cry was heard from the Sneezer behind them.

They turned quickly, and saw him in the last stage of mortal fear.

He was still erect, but all life, save in his eyes, had left his face.

His gaze was turned to the summit of the pass, and they, following it, saw a figure high above them.

It was some three hundred feet away, and of greatly diminished proportions, but there was no need for them to look twice to see who it was.

The slim, lithe, well-proportioned figure of Jack the Avenger was too well known to them.

He was slowly descending, and carried in his hand a revolver. As he drew nearer, they saw that his eyes were fixed on the hapless Sneezer.

He did not seem to be aware of their presence. Certainly he did not heed them, and came slowly down until he was within thirty yards of them.

Then he paused, and slowly raised his revolver.

Where was the courage of the braggarts then? It oozed out of their finger-ends.

A whisper in each of their hearts bade them keep still. It said—

"He has come to kill but one. If we

let him alone, he will let us go. We may escape him yet."

As for Jim Black, he tried to hide behind the others, but his burly form was not so easily disposed of.

Jack, without looking at him, had already noticed his presence—nay, more, he had known for days that the Settler had returned to his old ways and old companions.

But how fared it with the terror-stricken Sneezer?

He saw the dread revolver raised, his lips moved, but no sound escaped him, and suddenly he fell, as if he had been shot.

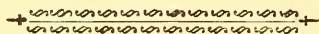
"Atch—e—e—e—ew!"

At last his terror had found expression, but the sound that so often caused mirth among his companions raised no merriment now. It had an expression in it that had never been heard before.

After it escaped him he lay still, and Jack came down calmly and looked at him. The Sneezer lay still, with his eyes fixed.

There was no terror in them now, no expression whatever, and a film was slowly gathering over the surface.

The Sneezer was no more—mortal fear had killed him.



CHAPTER LI.

DISHONOUR AMONG THIEVES—AN OFFER NOT TO BE REFUSED.

JACK had not fired a shot, and replacing his revolver in his breast, he turned his back upon the living and the dead, and retraced his way up the mountain-side.

The three living men let him go without moving, nor did they speak until he had deliberately clambered up the side of the pass, and disappeared over the summit.

Then the spell that had been upon them was broken.

They turned and looked at each other in a semi-sheepish fashion, and all began to make excuses for their cowardice at once.

"I thought you meant to bring him down," said the Swaggerer to the Panther.

"And I left him to you," replied the Panther. "I felt sure you or Jim would do the trick."

"I've beaten him once," said the Settler, "and that was my share of the work. But how about the Sneezer? He's fainted."

"The cub didn't think him worth shooting," said the Swaggerer, with a faint smile. "Now, Sneezer, old man, up you get."

He was going to give him a friendly kick, but the action was stopped by the sight of the dead man's face.

"Merciful powers!" he cried; "look there—he's gone!"

"He can't be," cried the Panther, hurriedly; "he wasn't even fired at."

"But he's dead, I tell you."

And so they all saw, and again dark dread returned to dwell in their hearts.

"I begin to think, with some that are dead and gone," said the Swaggerer, hoarsely, "that there is more than a mortal power in this young Jack Bold-heart."

"Killed without a touch," murmured the Panther, and Jim Black's brows were bent in troubled meditation.

"He keeps his word," he said, in a tone scarcely above a whisper.

"Yes," said the Swaggerer, involuntarily answering him.

And then there was a silence.

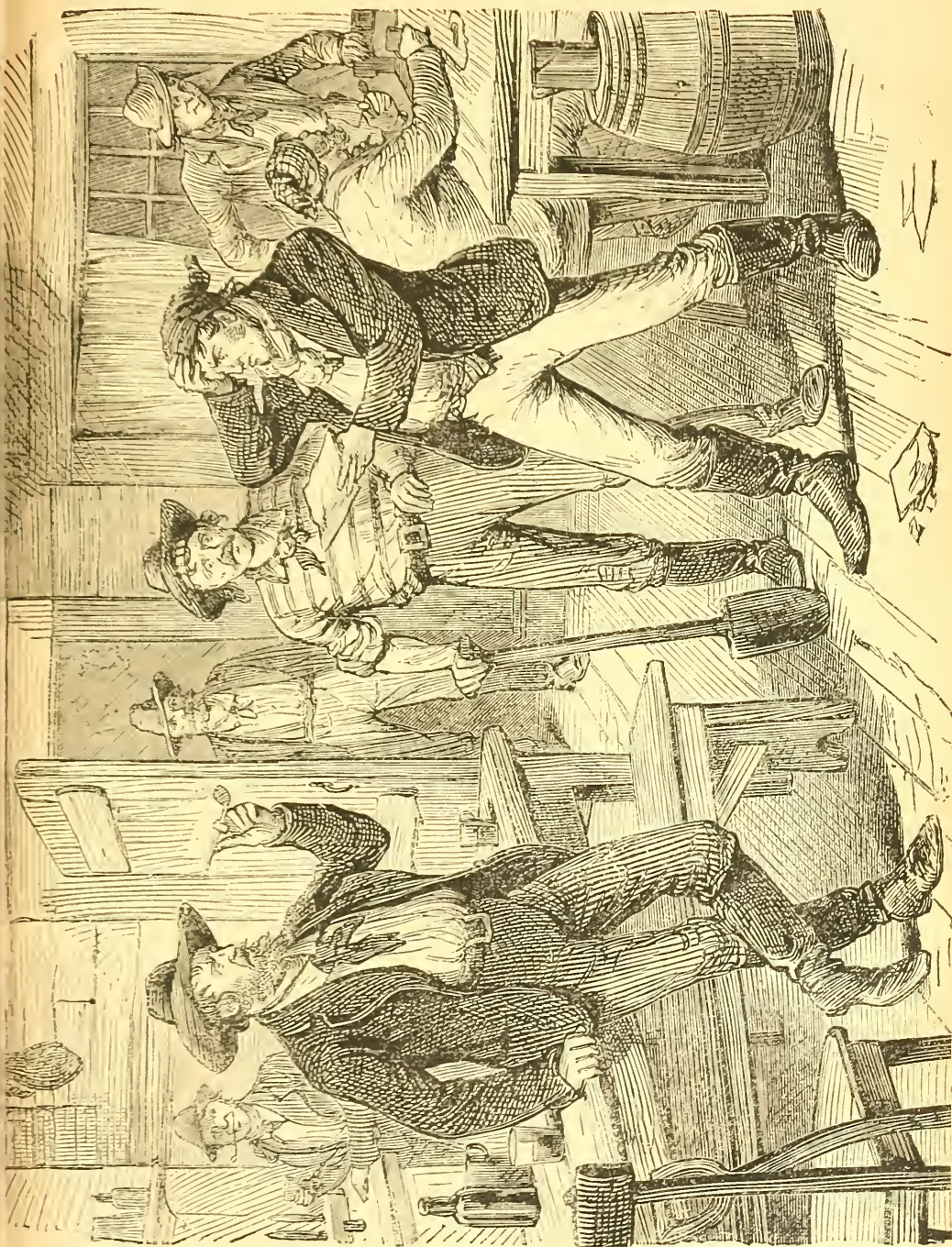
"I suppose we ought to bury the poor devil," said the Settler, at last.

"It's only what we might look for—ourselves," replied the Swaggerer.

They buried him as they had buried the Pantaloon, by laying him in a hollow and covering him with huge stones, raising a cairn some eight feet over him.

While engaged in this work, they spoke in whispers, but after it was done, and they were moving on again, they talked in something like their old strain.

"It's all luck," said the Panther; "this young Jack's got the run of it. He started well, and we play our game badly, but, by heaven! we'll win it yet."



"I WARN YOU THAT I MAY COME TO-MORROW, SO BE PREPARED, READ THE SETTLER."

The Settler recovered his spirits the soonest of them all. He had a hope that Jack had not perceived him, and having been spared once, might he not consider himself in the light of a pardoned man?

"I run a risk," he thought, "in being with these fellows. I'll cut 'em as soon as I can."

But they had got a mutual belief in the Settler's company being in some way a protection for them, therefore they wished that all should keep together.

The Settler soon discovered as much by the way they kept watch over him.

During the next ten days he was not alone. Even at night he detected that one watched while the other slept, and he began to curse the day that had brought them together again.

At last he made an attempt to get away.

They had come within measurable distance of the silver country, and were camping in a wood. About midnight it seemed to him that both the Swag-gerer and the Panther were sleeping.

"Now's the time," he thought, and lying down, began to creep away.

He had gone about twenty yards when he saw the Panther spring up, and make towards him.

"Come back, Jim Black!" he cried.

"I'm not going far," replied the Settler.

"You are going too far for us," cried the Panther; "pull up and come back, or I'll fire!"

The Settler rose, and came sullenly back to his place.

The Swaggerer, now awake, and fully alive to what had been going on, took the opportunity to speak openly.

"It won't do, Jim," he said; "we will go on together, and stand by each other until we fall."

"I think it best to separate," replied the Settler: "there's no reason or sense in our keeping together."

"Never mind if there isn't," said the Panther; "we'll do it."

The Settler looked at him, loweringly, and his hand moved towards his revolver pocket. The Swaggerer whipped his weapon out, and turned the muzzle towards him.

"No, Settler," he said; "that won't do."

"I suppose not," replied the Settler; "you are two to one."

"Come, don't let us have a split," said the Panther; "we don't any of us want to help that young fire-eater. We must stand by each other."

"And then the odds are against us," urged the Swaggerer. "Let us shake hands and swear to stand by each other."

The oath was taken—but what are oaths to such men?

They keep them when it is convenient to do so, and break them when it serves their purpose.

They pursued their way, the Settler with his eyes open for signs of the precious ore.

A whole week they moved about—not exactly in a bee-line, but dodging here and there to inspect portions of the country that looked promising.

But they found not what they sought.

"It's our luck," said the Swaggerer, grimly.

One day they came across a beaten track, and pursued it.

Ere they had gone many miles they saw a man on horseback approaching.

"Who is that?" asked the Swaggerer.

"It looks like young Jack," replied the Panther.

"Jack be hanged!" growled the Settler. "It's a man of forty, if he is a day."

"I wonder if he has any coin," said the Swaggerer, with a meaning look.

"You bet he's got some," returned the Settler.

"Would it not be a kindness to relieve him?"

The Panther assented, and the Swag-gerer rapidly portioned out the work.

"You take the bridle, Settler; you catch him by the leg, Panther, and pitch him out of the saddle, and I'll cover him when he's down."

"Don't bungle it," said the Settler. "He looks like a man who will fight."

"Look as innocent as you can," said the Swaggerer; "and no man show a weapon until I've got him on the grass. Shamble a bit, as if every bone ached in your body, and you were dead-beat."

The assumption was carried out to perfection, and the stranger came along as if he suspected nothing.

He proved to be a man of gigantic power, and the horse he bestrode was

a noble creature. There was an appearance of opulence about him that pleased the would-be plunderers.

When within ten yards of them, he suddenly reined up, whipped out a brace of revolvers, and covered them.

"Now, lads," he said, "I know your game, and let me tell you that it don't pay here."

They were not prepared for this, and could do nothing in defence.

"A fool's game," he continued, "for there's nothing to be got out of me. I've a biscuit, a brandy-flask, and these two poppers—nothing more."

"Ride on, then," said the Swaggerer.

"Not so," he answered, "for I want such men as you."

"On what game?" asked the Settler.

"Light work, good pay, and plenty of fun," was the reply, "and no risk of breaking the law."

"We must know what it is," said the Panther.

"It's to work on a bit of land I have a few miles farther up," said the stranger. "All your grub and drink found, and ten dollars a day for a year; after that a percentage on the profits."

"Gammon," said the Settler.

"It's no gammon, my friend," calmly rejoined the other. "Say the word, and you shall be on my ground in half-an-

hour. If you don't like my offer, go back."

"Go back!" exclaimed the Settler.

"Yes, my friend. If you go on without a pass from me, my men will string you up."

He looked as if he was speaking the truth, and the trio held a consultation together.

"It's good pay," said the Swaggerer, "and I think I see what his game is. He's got a mine, and is working it in secret."

"It isn't a bad offer," said the Panther.

"No," assented the Settler.

"And I don't think that that young devil could follow us," said the Swaggerer.

"Well, lads, what do you say?" sung out the stranger.

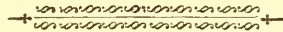
"We accept your offer," replied the Swaggerer.

"Wisely done," rejoined the stranger. "Trot on ahead, and I'll follow you. Go your own pace, and it will suit my horse and me."

As they were about to start, he asked their names, and they gave them as they are known to our readers.

"And I suppose you can give us yours?" said the Swaggerer.

"I am known here," he replied, "as the Silver King."



CHAPTER LII.

THE SILVER KING'S RIVAL—GOOD LUCK AND BAD NEWS.

A YEAR has passed away, and the three remaining foes of Jack are still alive.

They were now working for Tom Jordan, *alias* the Silver King, and received good pay and rations. They had had good companionship, and altogether a very jolly time of it.

Of course, they had kept the dark secret of their previous lives, as others around them doubtless had done also.

What had the past to do with the present?

The trio worked well, and worked better as the time passed on without a sign of Jack. Hope grew strong, and became almost a certainty.

"He has lost us," said the Swaggerer.

And at night, when work was over,

who could swagger about so well as he?

Tom Jordan treated his men well. They had the strongest liquor to drink, and the best tobacco and cigars to smoke, and furthermore they had all they liked when work was over.

"Business in the day, and pleasure at night," was his motto.

Altogether he had about a hundred men digging and blasting quartz, and keeping the pounding-machines going, but more than half had shares in the business.

Every week or so a worker became a shareholder, and he was then called upon to "stand treat."

This took the form of liquor, and the

debauch that followed generally passed away the Sunday.

When it came to the turn of the Swaggerer and his companions, they had very high jinks indeed.

Everybody got drunk except the cunning Tom Jordan.

He was always sober.

His share of the mine was half the profits, for he had discovered it; the rest, when the wages were paid, was divided among the shareholders.

Even they grew rapidly rich, and Tom Jordan's share was immense.

No wonder that he was called and considered himself the Silver King.

But on the day when the trio became shareholders he had a rude awakening.

The "boys" were all merry, drink had not yet made them quarrelsome, and they were singing, swearing eternal friendship, and in a general way going through the scale of drunken friendship.

And who so sweet and friendly as the Swaggerer? who so bluff and hearty as the Settler? and who so quietly agreeable as the Panther?

"You are three good fellows," said Tom Jordan, when he had got them a little apart from the rest, "and I like you—only you are so precious soft."

"Soft, are we?" said the Swaggerer, with a drunken wink, and the Settler swore that he was as wicked as Satan himself.

"I don't see it," said Jordan, shaking his head.

It was his way to get hold of men in their cups, and wheedle the secret of their lives out of them.

Interesting facts they disclosed might one day become useful.

"Ah, you don't know," said the Swaggerer, with a wink.

The Panther nudged him. He was not so drunk as the rest, and had a dim idea of the nature of Tom Jordan's examination.

"What do you want, Panther?" asked the Swaggerer.

"A drink," quickly put in Tom Jordan, as he forced a glass of spirits into the Panther's hand. "Drink, my lad, you are one of the company to-day, and ought to wet the occasion."

The Panther drank, and all his caution was gone. He, too, fell into the trap,

and was the first to let out anything of the past.

"Didn't you call us soft?" he asked. "I did," said Jordan; "precious soft."

The Panther steadied himself with one hand upon the table, and laid the other on Jordan's shoulder.

"You are a darned fool," he said.

"I don't think that," replied Jordan, with an air of simplicity. "I'm not mighty cute, but I ain't a fool."

"You must be," said the Panther, with a savage laugh, "to think that we are soft. Why, man, we've done—what haven't we done, Swaggerer?"

"Everything," replied the Swaggerer, unsteadily lighting a cigar.

"We have dyed hands," said the Panther, holding them up, "aye, and bodies, too; we are dyed with blood from head to foot."

"So," said Jordan, with a nod.

"It is so," replied the Panther, with a sneer. "Soft, indeed! I wonder who settled the captain of the 'Albatross'? Who—"

"Stop a minute," interposed the Swaggerer; "you give such a poor outline of a story. Let me tell it."

And then, with drunken exultation, he told Tom Jordan how he had "settled the business" of Captain Boldheart, and drowned his youngest son, and sent the eldest adrift upon the sea.

But he did not say anything about Jack having escaped, and carried out such terrible vengeance on four members of the band.

He left Tom Jordan to infer that Jack had died also.

"That's a very pretty story," said Tom Jordan, earnestly, "a very pretty story. You ain't quite so soft as I thought. Now, what's your story?" turning to the Settler. "I hope you have something good for me."

"I think so," said the Settler, who had been burning to give vent to his bit of brag; "just listen."

But Tom Jordan did not listen to his story that day, for as the Settler opened his lips, a tall, grey-headed, wiry man, in the costume of a hunter, came into the shanty, and joined the group.

"Hullo, Ralph! back again?" cried Jordan.

"Yes; I'm making round this way for deer," replied Ralph; "seen any?"

"No; I'm no hunter—not intended."

"Only in silver," replied the old hunter, "and much good it will do you when you've got it."

"I'll try to make use of it."

"You have no enjoyment in life, and will waste all your best time here. When you can neither work nor play, you will leave off, and think about spending your money."

"I want to be the tip-topper," said Tom Jordan; "I like to be head of all diggers."

"Which you ain't," said Ralph, shaking his head.

"But I am!"

"No, no, my lad," said the hunter, in a bantering tone; "you tumbled on a big vein, but if you had gone ten mile west, you would have found a bigger."

"Who says so?"

"I do, for I've seen it."

"Ah, that's your fancy."

"No, it ain't," replied the hunter; "it's being worked by a gang of men better than yours, and at the head of them is one who knows his business."

"What's his name?" asked Tom Jordan, pale with fury.

"Abel Newcombe."

"What!" cried Jordan, now livid.

"Abel, my old partner, that I swore to ruin, because he married the woman I was spoons on."

"He's there," said Ralph, "and his wife is with him, so is his daughter, a very pretty girl."

"But are you sure he beats me?" asked Jordan.

"Sure of it. He's rolling in twice as much as you. He is the true Silver King."

"It's hard for me to hear this," said Jordan, wiping his forehead. "With any man I should have felt it; but to think that Abel Newcombe, who I drove out of every place where I found him, should have the luck, it's maddening!"

"You do take it to heart," said Ralph. "I was afraid you would."

"Who is with them?"

"Oh, some good men, mostly English, and one young fellow I've made a friend on. He didn't care a rap for your silver; was often out with me on the hunt."

"No 'counting for tastes," said the

Swaggerer. "What's the young foo like?"

"Oh, he's bright and spry," said Ralph, "but not so merry as I should like to see him. He 'pears to me to be looking about him like."

"So we all do," said the Panther.

"But he's not looking about him in the ordinary way," replied Ralph. "I heard him talking to himself about three of 'em, and they must be found before he could rest, and sich like. You look pale rather, master."

"The whisky's bad," said the Swaggerer.

He and his companions had heard the words of the hunter, and the truth came upon them with a rush.

It sobered them.

"I suppose this young fellow has a name," said the Swaggerer, slowly."

"In course he have," said Ralph.

"What—is—it?"

"Jack Boldheart!"

They were sober now. Their heads were as clear as they had ever been, and their nerves strung up to the highest pitch.

Aghast they looked at each other.

"I'll take a drink," said Ralph.

"Aye, do," said Tom Jordan.

And these two, in turn, exchanged glances.

"Let us all have another drink," said Ralph; "as a rule, I stick to water, as being the stuff handiest in the woods, but this is my birthday, and I mean to be merry."

"You look so," said Tom Jordan; "but my new partners have all got a touch of something."

"There is nothing the matter with us," said the Swaggerer, but his blanched cheeks and quivering lips gave his words the lie.

They all returned to their drinking, and Tom Jordan and Ralph renewing the original subject, that of the rival Silver King, the Swaggerer drew a little apart with his friends.

"A curse upon him!" he said, meaning Jack, "to come into our country at such a time."

"It was always so," replied the Panther, with a ferocious oath; "as soon as we get a streak of luck, he comes to spoil it."

"I'll not budge," said Jim Black;

"we've got a fortune under our noses, and we'll stand our ground. Is it so?"

"Yes," said the Swaggerer and the Panther.

"Touch hands upon it," said Jim Black.

They did so, and he continued—

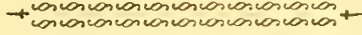
"All stand our ground, and the man

who budes an inch is a traitor to all, and deserves death."

"He ought to be shot," said the Panther.

The Swaggerer was silent.

"It is so," said Jim, "and, by heaven! I'll shoot him!"



CHAPTER LIII.

ABEL NEWCOMBE'S DIGGINGS—JACK IN GOOD QUARTERS—A NOTE OF WARNING.

RALPH, though professing to keep his birthday, did not drink much, nor stay very long at the shanty where the liquor was sold.

Taking advantage of a bit of a brawl between some of the men, he quietly withdrew.

His way lay across a rugged country, and ere he had gone far he came upon a man sitting upon a stone, quietly smoking a pipe.

It was Jacob Sturmby.

"Hullo, old man!" he said, "what news?"

"It was all as I'd heard," replied Ralph; "they came into shares to-day, and I give 'em a skeer."

"You didn't say much, I hope?"

"The very mention of his name was enough. It bleached 'em like linen b'iled in soda."

And Ralph, as he filled his pipe to keep company with the other, laughed heartily.

They moved on side by side, ascending a rocky piece of country that led them to a wood, through which they passed, and finally came to an open piece of land, their destination.

Here was a busy scene, for it was the spot where Abel Newcombe reigned, and he was the true Silver King.

His house, of considerable proportions, though built entirely of wood, stood on the right.

On the left was the engine-house, where the pounding-machine was kept going day and night.

Men were moving to and fro, and mules dragging in rough carts laden with the precious ore.

At the doors of numerous huts dotted about, stood women, knitting or other-

wise engaged, and a number of children rolled about in the sunshine.

A busy but peaceful scene; no brawling, no blaspheming—nothing but good honest work and cheerfulness.

Seated on camp-stools not far from the big house were the Silver King and Jack.

A year had made some difference in the latter; his figure was now filled out, and a finer, handsomer young fellow never walked.

His strength was apparent as he sat, in the length of limb and the breadth of shoulders.

In one thing he was, however, unchanged.

The determined look in his face remained the same.

He had paused in his work of vengeance, but his spirit was not at all appeased.

He was going on to the end, choosing his own time as he had done before.

As Ralph and Jacob Sturmby drew near, he rose, and Abel Newcombe, a fine, handsome man, in the prime of life, followed his lead.

"I'll just go down to the engine-house," he said. "How long will you be talking over your business, Jack?"

"Not more than five minutes," Jack answered.

"Well, when you've finished, lad, go and ask Annie to get out the tea. I'm getting wolfish."

Jack was soon put in possession of what had passed in the drinking shanty, and it raised the shadow of a smile upon his handsome face.

"You know one from the others, I suppose?" he said.

"Oh, yes; there's the Swaggerer, with his blackguard, respectable air,"

said Ralph, "the Panther, with his gipsy eyes, and the Settler, who could do a bit of housebreaking on a pinch. Oh, yes, I know 'em all."

"Good," said Jack, "you are a true friend, honest Ralph. Now, when will you travel that way again?"

"When you please," was the ready reply.

"Within a week?"

"I'll go to-morrow. It don't matter to me," said Ralph; "the country is pretty much alike."

"Then I will get you to leave a written message with the Settler," said Jack. "You can do it openly or secretly."

"Which you please," said Ralph.

"Perhaps he had better not know my messenger," rejoined Jack. "I will give you the letter by-and-by."

He left them, and entered the house of Abel Newcombe. There was no intermediate passage or hall; the open door led straight into a huge kitchen.

A number of hams and sides of bacon, and various and many other good things, were hanging from the rafters, and scattered about were chairs and cooking utensils without stint.

It was a model of the opulent settler's home, as the house was throughout.

A fire burned on the hearth, and near it stood a woman, who might have been forty, but looked younger, and near her was a girl of eighteen, whose cheeks deepened in colour as Jack came in.

The mother had been very pretty, and was remarkably good-looking still. No more silky hair ever crowned the head of woman, nor eyes of deeper blue ever beamed upon man, and rosier cheeks or riper lips never helped a woman to be charming.

Annie was like her mother, as pretty, if not prettier, than she had been in her young days, and no further description is needed.

Jack looked tenderly at her as he drew up to her side, and gave the message he was entrusted with. Then he sat down.

"Well, Mr. Restless," said Mrs. Newcombe, with a good-humoured shake of the head, "what have you been doing with yourself to-day?"

"Nothing," Jack answered.

"I don't like lazy men," said Mrs. Newcombe.

"Jack is not lazy," said Annie; "when you were unwell, he rode forty miles out and home to get you some medicine, and never halted to rest."

"Oh, don't mention that little affair," said Jack; "it was nothing."

"I don't forget it," replied the matron; "but I speak for his good. He's young, and strong, and there's a fortune here for him if he will only put his hand to it—"

"By-and-by," said Jack.

"By-and-by is no day," returned Mrs. Newcombe. "Come, Annie, can't you persuade him to stick more to work?"

"If anyone could, Annie is her name," said Jack; "but I cannot begin to work here just yet. I'm going away."

The colour fled from Annie's cheek, and Mrs. Newcombe turned upon him a look of the utmost amazement.

"Going away!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; to-morrow, perhaps—in a few days at farthest."

"And how long will you be gone this time?"

"I cannot tell."

"Oh," exclaimed Mrs. Newcombe, "just like your sex!"

"Believe me, I am sorry to go," said Jack.

"And we shall be so sorry, too," said Mrs. Newcombe, "for both Abel and myself like you. We don't know your business here, and we are not curious about it, but whether it's good or bad, we like you."

"It is just," said Jack.

"I've no doubt about it," said Mrs. Newcombe; "you are honest enough. But there, I've said enough. If you must go, you must, and if you've set your mind on it, you will go in spite of any of us."

"It is a matter of duty," said Jack, turning his face towards Annie.

But she stood with her eyes cast down, and neither moved nor spoke.

But he saw that her eyelashes were quivering, and there was a suspicion of a tear under them.

"I won't say any more now," said Jack, rising. "We shall have a long talk before I go. Shall I find Mr. Newcombe?"

"Aye, do," said the matron, "and

tell him tea is ready. He's not to dawdle over the quartz and silver, but to come at once.

"Just like 'em," she continued, as Jack left the kitchen. "They come and go, and forget you. Never trust a

man, Annie. Only one true man ever lived, and that is your father. Don't trust them."

Annie neither moved nor spoke, but the tear that had been lingering under her long lashes fell upon her cheek.

CHAPTER LIV.

A LAST MEETING, AND A SAD PARTING—THE SETTLER RECEIVES A MESSAGE.

"Must you go, Jack?"

"Yes," dear Annie."

"And is it true that you do not know how long you will be away?"

"Quite true."

They stood outside the house, with the light of the moon upon their young faces—a pretty pair. Around them the busy life outside had ceased.

Only the engine in the crushing-room was pounding and thumping away. They were as good as alone in the vast solitude of the wilderness.

Annie was silent for a few moments, and he stood watching the face that she tried to control.

Quietly he took her hand, and put his arm about her waist.

"Annie," he said, "only the one thing that I go upon could take me from you."

"And will you not tell me what it is?" she asked.

"Not until it is done," he answered. "Then I will come back and tell you all. You shall then judge me."

"No," she said, "I have no right."

"We have been very happy here, Annie."

"Very happy," she echoed.

"And the time has flown swiftly. It is a year since I met your father."

"And saved his life."

"No, indeed; he would have settled those skunks of Indians without me."

"He says not," said Annie; "there were a dozen at least—his horse was killed, and he was down."

"Well, let that pass," said Jack. "Annie, I want you to think kindly of me, and to trust me. If I never return to you—"

"As you may not."

"As I may not—I shall be dead."

She glanced up quickly, with a new

terror in her face, and clasped his arm with her small hands.

"Jack," she cried, "where are you going?"

"To avenge the foul murder of my dear father and brother," he replied, with a proud, determined look in his face. "No, Annie, you must not seek to turn me away—"

"But, Jack, why did you not tell us before? Who is it you are going against? My father will help you."

"Beyond outside help, I will have no aid," said Jack. "Alone I will bring my enemies to book!"

"Your enemies!" she said; "then there are more than one, dear Jack?"

"Walk with me," he said, "and I will tell you my story. I feel I cannot longer withhold it from you."

They turned from the open space, and sauntered to the wood. There, in its gloomy shades, he told his story, with all the passion and pathos that lay in him.

As he narrated the awful crimes which had deprived him of a father and a brother, he lived in the scenes again, and he carried Annie with him.

All her womanly sympathies were aroused, and when he finished, she was as pale and resolute as he.

"Now what would you have me do?" he asked; "tell me, Annie."

"Go on to the end," she answered, in a low tone; "spare none. This is a land of rough justice. Without it the murderer would go free."

"I have learned to love you," he said, "and I have perhaps faltered a little by the way. But now, Annie, I am strong again. My darling, we must part here."

"So soon, Jack?"

"At once. I have already taken

sufficient adieu of your parents, and I feel that you and I must part now. Annie, good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear Jack."

She held up her face, and their lips met in a loving kiss.

Then he drew back a little.

"If I come not back in two years," he said, "I shall be dead. Do not mourn, but forget me."

And then, with a wave of the hand, he was gone into the darker shadows of the wood, and lost to view.

* * * * *

Jim Black, the Settler, had been at work, and the day being warm, he laid his coat upon the ground.

It lay there all day, and at night he put it on and went off to the shanty for a drink.

The Swaggerer and the Panther had

just come in, and they brought with them some specimens of the ore they had been working upon.

"The richest yet found," they said.

Jim Black looked at the pieces they showed him, but thought he had a better specimen.

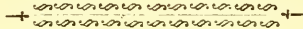
"I put it in my pocket to-day," he said. "I have it here. Hullo! what is this?"

A square note, neatly folded and addressed to the Settler.

"I think I know what that is," said the Panther.

The Settler, with a shudder, opened it, and read—

"You were spared once, but you have elected to return to your old companions—you are unchanged. I therefore warn you that I may come to-morrow. So be prepared—be ready for me at any moment, day or night. JACK."



CHAPTER LV.

THE SETTLER MAKES THE BEST OF A BAD JOB, AND STARTS ON A JOURNEY—A MIDNIGHT SURPRISE.

THE Settler did not betray so much emotion as one might have expected, for he had developed into a bit of a stoic.

"I wish he had named the time," he said, "and then I should have known when to expect him; but I don't like a cursed uncertainty."

His old companions no longer desired his society. The Swaggerer in particular showed a shrinking from him.

"If I were you, Settler," he said, "I'd bolt at once, and get across the sea. You've got the tin."

"Look at what I leave behind," said the Settler.

"Don't forget that your shares are good while you live," remarked the Panther.

"Or until I sell out."

"Look here," said the Swaggerer, "Panther and I can help you with some tin. Can't we, Panther?"

The Panther nodded.

"Between us we can lend you a thousand dollars, and that will keep you going, with your own money, until you've settled somewhere."

"And what then?"

"You drop us a line. We get a find now and then, and we'll arrange for your share of tin to be sent on."

"What will Tom Jordan say?"

"We'll get up a yarn to satisfy him, trust us," said the Swaggerer. "You have got a sweetheart you are busting to see, or a mother—"

"No, not a mother," said the Settler; "don't come that soft business with me."

"Well, a sweetheart, then. Come over to our crib, and we will give you the money."

"I know," said the Settler, looking steadily at them, "that there's no real friendship in this; but—"

"Come, Settler, don't be ungrateful."

"I'm truthful for once, and I know, and you know, that your game is to get me as far away as possible."

"Isn't it your game, too?"

"Yes; but you are thinking of the good it will be to you. You know that he will follow me if I went to the heart of China."

"We don't deny it."

"And the longer he is away, the longer peace for you; and I'll bet a

trifle that almost as soon as I've started, you'll go another way."

"Not yet," said the Swaggerer; "but we are wasting time. It is dark, and now is your time to move on. There's a train of mules with the silver going out; go with it."

The plan was carried out. One of the drivers was made drunk, and the Settler took his place. Before dawn he was many miles from the silver mine.

In the morning the Swaggerer told Tom Jordan that the Settler had got uneasy about a girl he was spoons on, and had taken himself off for a time.

"And I have his written authority to take his share of the profits," said the Swaggerer.

"It won't be much," replied Jordan, "for you've both overlooked a clause in our agreement, which says that a shareholder must work to receive anything."

The Swaggerer went away blue with fury, and he put the Panther into a terrible heat over it.

"It was like your foolery," he said, "to propose to lend him anything."

"It was the only thing to get him away," said the Swaggerer.

Meanwhile the Settler had ridden on with the train, and every hour increased his safety, he thought.

"I got off before," he said, "and why should I not do so again?"

His fellow-drivers were a rough lot, who, when they discovered that he had been substituted for the original driver, did not trouble their minds about it.

"We've got a wager on about it," said the Settler, "and if I win I'll stand drink enough for you to swim in."

He did not give the particulars of the wager, nor did they ask for them.

Whenever they stopped at a shanty by the way, the Settler was free with his money, and they were satisfied.

Once they were attacked by Indians, who, after some stubbornness, were driven off.

The Settler fought as well as any, and killed two of the redskins with his own hand.

"And yet," he thought, "I am running away from a youngster. But then the luck's with him, and the odds are against me."

The first place of any importance that they arrived at was Crink's Town.

Here there were signs of civilisation, and police to look after the precious burdens borne by the mules.

The Settler put up at what was called an hotel, but it was little more than a big shanty.

There was, however, what he liked—a bar to get drink, and a treat he had not enjoyed for many a day—a feather bed to sleep on.

"It's a good twelve years since I slept on one," he said; "what may be the charge for it?" asked the Settler.

"Only ten dollars," was the reply; "it's dirt cheap. You can get a month's sleep out of it in a single night."

The Settler made a wry face.

It was only a luxury once in a way.

"I'll take it," he said.

They took him into the room where the bed was, and he tried it by lying down there and then.

"Soft as down," he said, in ecstacy; "but what bed is that?" pointing to an old bedstead across the room.

"That's a rough mattress," was the answer.

"Who sleeps on it?"

"Whoever comes and wants a bed."

"Well, mind you get somebody respectable," said the Settler, and he lounged down to the bar to drink.

The Settler went on drinking and smoking until it was time to go to bed.

The outside customers were dismissed, and the keeper of the saloon gave the Settler a lantern.

"Mind you get into the right bed; I've let the other," he said.

"Have you?" said the Settler; "then all I hope is that the other party's got the right one."

"Oh, he's right enough," was the reply.

The Settler, with a step that was rather unsteady, sought his room, and turned in.

The lantern gave a very poor light, and he could only dimly see the form of a man lying on the other bed.

"Hullo, mate!" he cried.

No answer.

"Sound enough," muttered the Settler; "anyhow, this bed's mine."

Kicking off his boots, he threw himself down upon it, and was soon snoring.

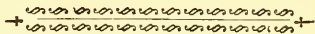
How long he had slept he knew not

—he never knew, but suddenly he was awakened by a hand being laid upon him.

He opened his eyes, and stared first

at a lighted lamp, then at the bearer of it.

"Mercy!" he gasped, "mercy!"
It was Jack Boldheart!



CHAPTER LVI.

A PLEASANT PLACE OF REST—A RUDE AWAKENING—NUMBER FIVE.

THE Settler neither moved nor spoke, but lay like one under a spell, with his eyes fixed on his unwelcome visitor.

It was Jack who broke the silence.

"I hope," he said, "that you are prepared for me, and will meet me like a man."

Not a word came from the Settler's lips, and his eyes neither moved nor blinked.

"The last time we met," continued Jack, "it was open ground. Your cowardice prompted you to run away. You will not be able to do so now."

"I thought I was let off," said the Settler, in a low, hoarse voice.

"So you were, on conditions," replied Jack, "and those conditions you have broken."

"I've led an honest life lately," said the Settler, sullenly.

"But not with honest men," said Jack; "but I am not here to argue with you. Rise, man."

"It ain't fair to make me fight again."

"It is good to hear a man like you talking of what is fair and unfair."

The Settler sat up in his bed, and glared around him like a wild beast in a cage. Jack, revolver in hand, stood between him and the door—there was no escape that way.

His eyes wandered to the window, and Jack, with a little smile, saw the look, and answered it.

"I have two friends outside," he said, "who will prevent your escape that way."

The Settler groaned, and buried his face in his hands. Now that the supreme moment of his life had come, when death stood before him, he was as big a coward as need be.

Bully, thief, and murderer, he was, by the laws of nature, peculiarly averse to punishment, and had a mortal dread of dying.

"Won't you have mercy on me?" he asked.

"What mercy had you on my noble father?" said Jack.

"Let me live another week," whined the Settler.

"Remember my brother," said Jack.

"I will go where you like—do what you wish."

"Think of the murdered men of the 'Albatross,'" said Jack. "Nō, I will not spare you. Stand up. There is your weapon."

He tossed a revolver upon the bed, but the Settler would not take it; he still sat rocking himself to and fro.

"I have to warn you that I shall give but little grace," said Jack.

In a moment the Settler had seized the weapon, and sprang to his feet.

He fired at Jack, and missed, fired a second time, and missed again.

Then he made for the door, shrieking for help.

Jack, with compressed lips, took steady aim at him, and as he wrenched the door open, fired.

The Settler's foot was on the threshold; he could hear the tramping of feet, and the cries of those coming to his rescue, and then all was over.

With a bullet in his back, he staggered forward, uttered a gasping cry, and fell.

"I think I have him this time," said Jack, and opening the window, he dropped lightly to the ground, where Jacob Sturmby and old Ben were impatiently awaiting his coming.

"It is done," he said, and they, moving on quickly, were speedily lost in the gloom of night.

The landlord of the place was the first on the spot where the Settler lay, and he was on the point of tripping over him, when he saw him lying across his path.

"Now, my beauty," he said, "who have you been quarrelling with? Here, somebody, lift him up, and see what is the matter with him."

There were several of the mule-drivers there, and two of them lifted up the man who had forced himself upon them.

"He is dead," they said, and laid him down again.

"Well, it's no affair of mine," said the landlord.

"Nor ours," they answered.

"But he came with you. Take him out and bury him."

This they positively declined to do, and in the end Jim Black was sent to a morgue attached to the place, seldom without an occupier.

He lay there for three days unclaimed, and then the authorities buried him with as little ceremony as they would a dog, in a nameless grave.

Nobody asked his name, nobody cared about him, but the drivers in due time went back, and carried the story to Tom Jordan.

He in turn told it to the Swaggerer and the Panther, finishing with a laconic piece of advice.

"You had better clear out," he said, "for as sure as sun-up there's somebody coming this way who'll break the bark of your bodies."

"But we can't go," said the Swag-

gerer. "All we are worth in the world is here."

"It won't be worth much to you if you stop," said Jordan. "I'll give you a thousand dollars to clear out, as I'm not partial to funerals."

They took the money, and the next day turned their backs upon a place that once promised so much.

"A curse upon the cub!" said the Swaggerer. "May lightnings wither him!"

"All froth," said the Panther. "Cursing never so much as gave a headache to the one who is cursed. Try and act a bit if you can."

"You can preach," replied the Swaggerer, "and what do you do when the pinch comes?"

"I can do something now," said the Panther.

"What's that?"

"End it for both of us. Put your revolver to my heart, and I'll put mine to yours. I'll count three, and then we can fire."

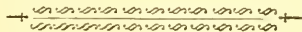
"I can't do that," said the Swaggerer, in trembling tones.

"No, of course you can't," sneered the Panther.

"Perhaps you thought I would say no?"

"Just what I did think."

"And that is why you proposed," said the Swaggerer; "there is a pair of us."



CHAPTER LVII.

OUTCAST EVERYWHERE—RALPH GOES ON BEFORE.

THEY left the mining-district at dawn, and it was yet early when the foregoing discussion took place. When the Swaggerer said there were a pair of them, the Panther, contrary to his expectation, simply nodded his head.

"It's true," he said; "we ain't the men we were."

"Not a bit of it," assented the Swaggerer.

"Never been the least the same since that job of the 'Albatross.'"

"No."

"And yet we did black things

together before, and didn't bother ourselves. How is it?"

"I don't know," groaned the Swaggerer.

"I'll tell you, then," said the Panther; "it's a deed so black that all we've done before were angel's deeds in comparison. Do you remember how you killed Bold-heart?"

"I won't listen to it," cried the Swaggerer.

"But you shall!" hissed the Panther. "I'm in the humour for it. I want to see you writhe as if the fiends had you,

for all that I and the others have suffered we owe to you."

"I don't deny it. I agree with you—only don't speak of it."

"But I must and will. I can see Boldheart, as good a man as ever sailed a ship, standing before us, with that brave look of honesty on his face."

"Panther, have done."

"He smiled on us like the good fellow he was, and you went up to him in that sneaking, oily way of yours—"

"Have pity on me, Panther."

"Pity to the fiends! Shall you and I talk of such a thing now? 'Captain Boldheart,' you said to him, 'I am only a common sailor now, but there was a time when I was something better.'"

"Something better," groaned the Swaggerer. "Oh, the past—the past!"

"He looked at you," continued the Panther, "and all of a sudden a light leaped into his face. 'Good heaven!' he cried, 'I know you now—you are my old friend, Norton Gray.'"

"Panther, will you be silent?"

"When I choose, and not before. The moment he cried out your real name, you sprang upon him, and plunged your knife into his heart. He fell, and I can see his face now with the glory of a better world upon it. 'Gray,' he said, 'I forgive you, as I hope to be forgiven.' Then you fell upon him with an axe, and hacked at him as if he had been your bitterest foe instead of friend."

"He was no friend," said the Swaggerer, dabbing his forehead with his handkerchief.

"He was—he showed it as he died," returned the Panther, "and after he was gone his son confirmed his words. You denied it then, you deny it now, but you know it is true."

"Panther," said the Swaggerer, white with agony, "are you going to give me much of this?"

"As much as I please, and when I please," answered the Panther. "It is a relief to me to put a double burden on you. If you object to my company, go your way and I'll go mine."

"Whichever way we go," said the Swaggerer, "the end will be the same."

"It is approaching," said the Panther, recklessly. "I can see only one friend for us now."

"And who is that?"

"King Alcohol," cried the Panther. "Drink, my lad, drink! I shall stop at the first settlement we cross, and drink there while the money holds out."

"It is a good thought," said the Swaggerer. "We will drink and die together."

Late at night they came upon a body of men round a camp-fire, numbering perhaps a score.

They went boldly up, after the manner of travellers, and asked if they might rest there.

"Let us look at your faces," cried one, who appeared to be leader.

Taking up a burning brand, he held it aloft, and scanned their faces closely. Tossing the impromptu torch back again, he said—

"Pass on."

"Pass on?" repeated the Panther.

"Yes, go your way."

"We are forlorn."

"Pass on, I say, or we will whip you on. We know you!"

"Well, suppose you do," said the Swaggerer, with a forced laugh.

"Remember the 'Albatross!'" said the man.

And there was a murmuring among the rest.

Alarmed, they hurried on, and, foot-sore and weary, put some miles between them and the men.

Then they lay down on the bare ground, and slept the sleep that comes with utter exhaustion.

In the morning they shot a rabbit with their revolvers, and ate it almost raw. It was poor food, but better than none, and they moved on again, choosing what appeared to be a well-beaten track.

It led them to a small collection of huts, dignified by the name of Beecher's Town, and here they found the same inhospitable welcome the miners had given them.

As soon as they entered the place about a dozen men and women came to meet them.

Their looks were threatening, and the Swaggerer saw that there was no rest for him and the Panther there.

"You must go farther on," said one of the men.

"We only want to buy some food and drink," replied the Swaggerer.

"You can't have either here."

"Let us have drink alone, then."

"No; nothing here. Go on."

"But why can't you help two starving devils who only want to buy bread?" asked the Panther.

"Remember the 'Albatross,'" was the reply, and with white faces the two doomed men pursued their way.

"What does it all mean?" asked the Swaggerer, with a despairing gesture.

"All the fiends of the bottomless pit are leagued against us," replied the Panther.

"They were with us once."

"But now they've turned."

It was a puzzle to them. But how were they to know that Ralph the trapper had gone forth against them, and was travelling far and wide with the story of their crime, and a description of their persons?

But so it was—he had undertaken the task from Jack, and performed it gladly.

Being an amazing walker, and requiring little rest, and having in addition a thorough knowledge of the country, he succeeded in making every place too hot for the two villains.

He went here and there, covering treble the ground they did, came back upon their trail, took it up, and never lost sight of them, without once showing himself.

Unseen he played the part of assistant avenger, and for days and weeks, wherever they went, the two men were told to "move on."

They slept on the plains, and fed on what they shot or found.

Sometimes there was nothing but roots for them, and they never at the best had anything more palatable than the flesh of some small animal, barely warmed with haste at a wretched fire.

Turn which way they would, there was no friendly shelter for their heads, no friendly voice to bid them welcome.

From one and all they received the stern, "Get you gone from here," and

if they ventured to ask why, the answer was always the same—

"Remember the 'Albatross.'"

With hair unkempt and ragged clothing, they soon became more like wild men than civilised beings. Fury and fear struggled for mastery in their hearts.

"How long are we to bear this?" asked the Swaggerer.

"As long as the cub chooses," growled the Panther.

They had halted for the night, and the Panther was engaged in lighting a fire. He was blowing some hot embers into a flame, and paused a moment to answer his companion.

"Every man's hand is against us," said the Swaggerer.

"Every man's," answered the Panther.

"Then let our hands be against theirs," said the Swaggerer, with a bitter oath. "They have made wolves of us, let us act like brute beasts."

"Haven't we done that sort of thing before?" asked the Panther.

"Perhaps we have; but now let us choose a hiding-place, and lie hidden by day; at night we can start out and show our fangs."

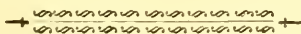
"In what way?"

"Let us kill women and children, and leave the homes of men filled with mourning."

"It is a good, sneaking idea," said the Panther, "and I'm in with you. We're driven to it, no less. To-morrow we will look for a den and begin. Women and children! It is a good idea that, Swaggerer."

And the Panther chuckled with fiendish glee, the now burning fire blazing up and showing his demoniacal face.

"If anybody's to blame for this," he said, "it is not you or me. We are driven to it, my lad—driven to it. Women and children! Ha, ha! I like the notion, and I'm longing to begin. Swaggerer, you are a bully boy, and I'd drink your health if I had anything to drink."



CHAPTER LVIII.

IN THE SILVER SETTLEMENT—THE SETTLER'S BOY—A DASTARDLY DEED.

HALFWAY up a big hill, part of a "spur" of hills branching off the Rocky Mountains, was the Silver Settlement, with a little community numbering about two hundred souls.

They were all diggers, men, women, and children, each doing what they could in the search for the precious ore.

There was not a bachelor in the place. All were married men, mostly with families, varying from eight possessed by Dick Merryweather, to one belonging to Harold Deane.

The latter was an Englishman, and a man of good family. The university education his father gave him had not done him any good at home or abroad, but in the Old Country he stood on the borders of starvation, and in the new land he prospered.

His wife was a lady, and therefore made no fuss about adapting herself to circumstances. She, both at home and abroad, was admired by all the men, and respected by the women, and had two things she loved ever near her.

These were her husband, and Hugh, her son, a boy of eleven years of age.

He was a bright-eyed, merry little fellow, who laughed and sung both at work and play, beloved by everybody.

He was a little trapper, too, and could snare a rabbit or a hare as well as any poacher. By his cleverness in this way the Deanes often had good fare for themselves, and occasionally something to give their neighbours.

One morning the little community awoke at dawn as usual, and after a hurried breakfast, began their labours.

Time was precious, it truly meant money to them, and they allowed themselves bare time to eat, drink, and sleep.

Little Hugh and his parents were among the first to appear, and Hugh said he would first go and look to some snares he had set lower down the hill.

"In a famous place," he said, with a laugh. "Right in the thick of a lot of bushes, just the other side of the wood. I'll not be long."

They waved their hands to him, and the boy sped away.

With light hearts they went to their work.

The husband dug the earth, and the wife washed it in a "cradle" with some water from the rill that ran down the hill close by.

So half-an-hour passed.

"Hugh is a long time away," said Mrs. Deane.

"Time is always long to you when he is absent," answered the husband.

They went on with their work for another quarter of an hour or so. Then the anxious mother stopped again.

"Hugh has never been so long before," she said.

"The young dog has gone on a little way to set his snares," said the father.

"I wish I could see him," said Mrs. Deane.

She shaded her eyes with her hand, and looked down the slope.

A little farther down there was the wood, as it was called, a mere clump of trees, beyond which Hugh had gone.

There were no signs of the boy.

"I wish, Harold," she said, "that you would go and find him."

"My dear wife," he said, "what harm can have come to him?"

"I don't know, and yet I am very anxious. Will you go?"

"If you like," said Harold Deane, and laid down his tools.

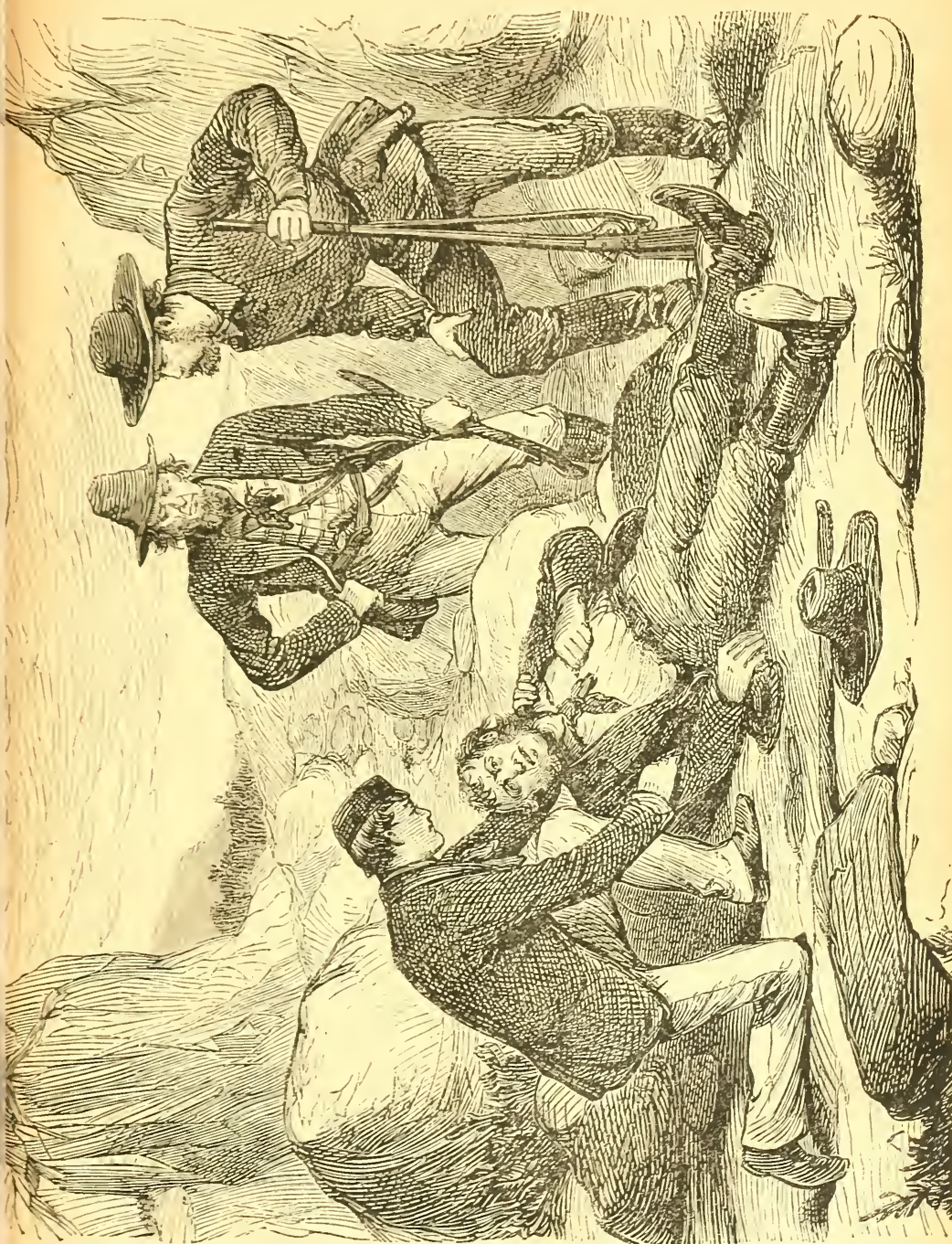
Putting on his coat, by sheer gentlemanly instinct, he strolled down the slope, passed through the wood, softly whistling, and on the other side came upon Hugh.

He was kneeling, and his head was close to the earth, as if setting a snare.

"Now, Mr. Lazybones," said the father, jocosely, "give up that sort of fun; your mother is nervous about you."

The boy did not stir.

With a sudden chill upon him, Harold Deane went hurriedly up to the lad, and in a moment all the light of his life was gone.



“MY LIFE IS RUNNING OUT FAST. LET IT GO EASY,” CRIED BEN.”

The boy did not stir because he was dead.

There was the wound at the back of his head, dealt by a cruel, murderous hand. A giant could not have received it and lived.

The father stood still for a moment; then, with a sudden movement, stooped down and raised the little boy.

"Hugh, speak to me!" he cried. "Oh, heaven! it cannot be. You are not dead."

But there were the sightless eyes, the parted lips, and the loose, dangling limbs to answer him. A deep groan burst from his lips.

"Who have we injured?" he cried. "Who have we made an enemy of? Who could have done this hellish deed?"

And then he began to ramble, and stare about him; but in a little time he recovered himself, and, with his dead darling in his arms, went upward.

Mrs. Deane was watching for his coming, and as soon as he emerged from the wood with his burden, she uttered a piercing shriek and ran towards him.

"Steady," he cried, "don't touch him yet, Marie. We must bear it."

She saw the blood that had oozed from the wound, and high above all sounds rose her voice—

"Murdered!"

"Yes, Marie, some fiend has killed him."

The other diggers now saw that something was wrong, and leaving their work, clustered around the sorrowing parents.

The story was briefly told, and loud cries and curses rent the air.

Work was abandoned for the day, and in a little while fifty armed men were scouring the country.

They believed the murder had been committed by Indians, but found no signs of them.

The only person they met was a thin, wiry trapper coming towards them.

He gave a good account of himself, and no suspicion was attached to him.

Nevertheless it was thought wise to ask him to stay in the settlement for a day or two.

"I am pressed for time," he said. "I am hurrying on the trail of men who may have been guilty of this crime."

"What are they like?" they asked.

It was Ralph who was thus questioned, and he gave a description of the Swaggerer and the Panther.

"Nobody like them had been their way," said the diggers, and, as it was now near sunset, they all returned to the settlement.

It was nearly dark when they arrived, and Ralph postponed an intended visit to the spot where the murder was committed.

"Can you take up the trail?" asked Harold Deane.

"If there is only the shadow of it," replied Ralph.

"Find the murderers, and bring me to them," said Harold Deane.

"If they are the men I suspect," said Ralph, "I cannot do it."

"Why not?" asked Deane.

"They are wanted by another. Let me tell you his story."

He told it to all the settlement, standing on a block-stone near the camp-fire.

In a dense circle, the people stood amazed, listening with wonder and horror.

And while he told the tale two men not far away lay listening to it unobserved.

They had crept up and lay under a lot of loose rubbish, boards, and tools tossed aside for the night.

It was an old story to them.

"He speaks like an eye-witness," the Panther whispered.

"He had a good teacher to tell it him," replied the Swaggerer.

And indeed Ralph had related the story like one who had been on board the "Albatross." Breathlessly his auditors listened.

When he paused there was a silence, every man and woman standing still, some holding their breath, and none speaking.

The crackling of a wood fire close by sounded loud and sharp in the stillness.

Then suddenly, as if led by one impulse, a sound burst from every lip—cries, groans, and deep anathemas.

The combination was appalling to the two men crouching hard by.

Their haggard faces blanched, their lips quivered, and they trembled from head to foot.

Like hidden rats they lay, and dare not move while the assembly remained.

It did not break up for nearly an hour. Only Ralph and Harold Deane and his wife at once withdrew.

The rest remained in knots discussing what they had heard, and each man and woman had some suggestion for the punishment of the offenders when caught.

Any or all of them would have carried out the punishment they named.

It was not pleasant for these two skulking villains. They lay and quaked and cursed their folly in coming there as spies.

At length the people began to move

away, talking of what they would do in the morning.

All work was to be given up until the murderers were found.

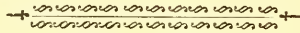
"No cradle shall rock, no spade or pick touch the earth," said one man, "until they are found."

Then they went slowly to their huts.

"Shall we go now?" asked the Panther, in his softest tone.

"Not yet," replied the Swaggerer; "give them time to get to sleep."

They gave them time, an hour, that seemed an age, and then, with the slinking air of midnight wolves, they stole away.



CHAPTER LIX.

THE PURSUIT—A LONE WOMAN LEFT IN CHARGE—TWO UNWELCOME VISITORS.

At an early hour the settlement was awake and stirring. Harold Deane was the first to appear, and no wonder, for he had not slept that night.

The sun arose, and all were ready for moving. Some had horses, but the majority were going on foot in bands of five and six.

Ralph was to lead one, Harold Deane another, Dick Merryweather a third, and so on.

And the women were going, too, taking the children with them, all but one old woman, Dick Merryweather's mother.

She was nearly eighty, and almost blind, and could be of no service. They decided to leave her behind.

"But you won't mind that, will you, mother?" said Dick.

"Not at all, my dear boy," she said; "but don't you get into mischief."

He was a round-faced, good-humoured looking fellow, and laughed at the idea.

"You don't think these skunks will fight, do you?" he said. "Bless you, they will run away from the boys, who are only armed with sticks!"

"But why take the children?" asked the old woman.

"We can't keep the women back," said Dick, shrugging his shoulders, "and the children are burning to do something to avenge the death of little

Hugh. They are as eager as a pack of hounds on the scent."

"It was a cruel deed," said the old woman.

"Well, good-bye, mother," said Dick, cheerfully.

He stooped and kissed her. The old woman patted him fondly on the shoulder, and he went away.

She hobbled to the door, and stood watching the departing settlers as long as she could see them.

"A brave lad, a bonny boy," she murmured; "the kindest and best of sons."

She did not speak without reason, for Dick had brought her across the sea, and taken her with him wherever he went.

Having a wife and a large family made no difference to him.

"Mother is no burden," he said, and she had never been one to him or his wife.

The old woman returned to the fire and put on the kettle to boil. She was going to cheer her loneliness with a cup of tea.

She put a little tea in the teapot, and sat with it ready.

By-and-by the water began to steam and bubble, and the invigorating beverage was quickly made.

She poured out a cup, and with ex-

pectant eyes was raising it to her lips, when she heard a sound by the door.

Turning, she saw a form which she first thought was of some animal, but soon perceived that it was a man kneeling.

"Who's there?" she asked.

"Morning, missus," said the man; "anybody at home?"

"Nobody," she said.

"All gone?"

"Yes, to hunt the murderers."

"That's a good idea," said the man, "and I hope they will catch them. You know me, of course?"

"No, I think not," said the old woman.

"I'm Jim the Pedlar, and I travel with my partner, Jack."

"Oh, do you?"

"My partner, Jack, is outside—may he come in?"

"Of course he may. But I sha'n't buy anything. I'm not the missus. I live with my son and his wife."

"Oh, do you? And you are very happy together, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, we are."

"Hullo, Jack!" cried the man. "Come in."

And then Jack, in the person of the Swaggerer, entered, and joined his partner, the Panther.

The dim eyes of the old woman could barely see them, and their ferocious, villainous looks escaped her.

She gave them both a welcome, and asked if they would like some tea.

"Haven't you anything stronger?" asked the Panther.

The old woman shook her head.

"My Dick's got a little whisky somewhere," she said, "but he keeps it for medicine."

"You don't know where it is, I suppose?" said the Swaggerer.

"No, I don't," replied the old woman, rather curtly.

"And you would object to our looking for it?" said the Panther, with a glare in his ferocious eyes.

"You don't talk like pedlars," cried the old woman, with sudden alarm. "Let me come nearer and have a look at you."

"Come as near as you like," replied the Swaggerer.

At the same moment he made a signal

to the Panther, who passed quickly behind the old woman.

The movement was unperceived by her.

He drew a bowie-knife from his belt, and opened the blade, stealthily.

"Now," said the Swaggerer, "take a good look at me."

The old woman put her face closer to his, and shaded her eyes with her hand. He leered at her like a son of Satan.

"You are no pedlar," said the trembling old woman. "You are a loafer—worse, perhaps. And now I think of it, there are two of you—and it is two they're gone to look for. Where's the other? I know you now. I—"

The Panther's arm was round her, and in a moment the cruel deed was done—the life-blood flowed swiftly from the victim's neck, and she sank upon the floor.

"Go and see if we are likely to be disturbed while I examine the place," said the Panther.

The Swaggerer gladly went out, for the expression of the old woman's face when she saw her peril, was not easily to be forgotten.

Outside, he leaned against the hut, and wiped his heated face with his coat-sleeve.

"It doesn't come so easy as I thought," he muttered. "What a horrible look the old woman gave me!"

There was no danger threatening him or his companion in crime.

The diggers were all away scouring the woods and plains, the only signs of them being a small cloud of dust far away in the horizon.

This was raised by the few horsemen who were scouring the open country.

The Swaggerer tried to smile as he saw them on their fruitless search, but it was a painful, miserable effort.

The weight of his crimes lay upon him like a mountain.

He was getting bowed like an old man.

The burly strength, the upright, active form, the dark, flashing eye, were becoming things of the past.

The Panther did his work within silently, and presently came forth.

"Can't find the whisky," he said,

laconically, "but I've made the old woman comfortable."

"Have you?"

"Yes. Come and see her now."

"I've seen her enough," said the Swaggerer, sullenly.

"You shall look at her again," replied the Panther, seizing him by the arm.

He forced the Swaggerer to the door, and made him look in.

After all, the picture was not so very terrible.

The old woman was sitting by the fire, much in the same position as they found her in, with a cup of tea beside her.

"I've propped her up on the other side with some bits of timber," said the Panther, with a grin. "What a pleasant surprise there will be for her dutiful son when he comes home!"

"It will give him a shaking," said the Swaggerer.

"Rather," returned the Panther. "I think I hear him say, 'Well, how are you, mother? We have had a long job looking for those rascals, but we haven't found them.' Ha, ha! And then—"

"Oh, have done, Panther!"

"And then when the old woman doesn't look up and speak to him, he

will give her a loving nudge that will bring the props down, and—"

"Oh, drop it, Panther; you carry a thing too far."

"I'll carry it to the end," said the Panther, hilariously, "and no man can carry it further than that."

"Panther," said the Swaggerer, glaring at him, "I see you did find the whisky."

"Well, what if I did?" asked the Panther, with a grin; "there was only half a pint of it—not a sip for two men."

"This is not the way to treat a pal."

"Who's my pal?"

"I am."

"Oh, indeed; I thought you were the leader, and I the follower. I'll remember that we are pals with the next lot I find. Let's have a look into the other cribs."

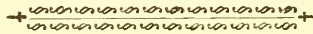
He walked away with a nonchalant air, and the Swaggerer, with bent brows, followed behind.

He thoroughly understood the spirit in which the Panther had spoken.

Their positions had changed about.

The Panther was now the leader, and the Swaggerer his follower, and the new follower knew that the new leader would do just as he pleased.

Defiance was out of the question.



CHAPTER LX.

THE DISCOVERY—DISMAY IN THE SETTLEMENT—JACK ARRIVES.

LATE in the day the diggers, weary with their fruitless search, began to return home; the foremost party was headed by Dick Merryweather.

He was accompanied by his wife and children, and they entered the hut in a body.

The fire was out, but the old woman still sat there, with her teacup beside her.

"Hullo, mother!" cried Dick, cheerily; "been having a nap, and forgot all about tea? Wake her up, Maggie."

His wife went and laid a hand upon her shoulder. The body of the old woman rolled over, and she fell upon her back, showing the wound across her neck.

"Merciful heaven!" cried Dick, "what is this?"

The cries of the children brought their neighbours to the door, and a little crowd shut out the light. Dick came staggering out, with his dead mother in his arms.

"Let me see if it's all over with her," he cried, hoarsely. "Give me light—stand a little away!"

But it was all over with her, and men and women stared aghast at the awful sight. No need for anyone to ask who had been guilty of the deed.

Ralph came forward and looked at her calmly. He was not a demonstrative man, but his heart bled for that wailing family.

"The wolves must have doubled on

us," he said; "we ought to have left a guard behind us."

"It was my fault," wailed Dick; "but I know her heart. If she can see me now, and hear me, she will forgive my blunder. Poor mother! so loving and kind. To come to such an end as this!"

"Bear up, Dick," said one of his friends near him.

"I'll try to. Friends, don't stop here, you can do nothing. We'll bury her to-morrow. It's no use hunting these wolves, we must trap them. I'll have a trap baited for 'em afore long!"

He was heard by a dismayed people, who went silently to their houses, and shut themselves in to discuss the horrors of the last two days.

Late at night there came the sound of footsteps to Deane's door, and a hand lightly tapped upon it.

"Come in," cried Deane.

He stood with his gun ready in case of foes; but it was only Ralph, the trapper.

"I promised you to stay here for a few days," he said.

"You did," replied Harold Deane.

"I am here to recall that promise. Set me free from it."

"If you will; but surely you are not afraid of these hidden robbers?"

Ralph smiled.

"I've carried my life in my hand for many a year," he said, "and I don't know that I ever quaked yet. No; I am going for my young master."

"What can he do?"

"He will find these fiends. They are reserved for him. Until he comes, they will be secure."

"Go, then," said Deane, "and bring him speedily."

"He will be here in three days," said Ralph, and, with a motion of his hand, departed.

It was a starry night, and the stars were his guide. Keeping Ursa Major straight in front of him, he struck through the little wood for the plain.

As he passed the spot where little Hugh was murdered, he raised his cap and murmured something that was like a prayer, and journeyed on over the plain.

The fatigue of the day he ignored, and travelled until the night was nearly over.

Then he lay down on bare earth, obtained an hour's sleep, and moved on again.

With only a little fruit for food, and water for drink, he kept moving all the day. As night drew on, he sighted a vast wood in the horizon.

When darkness came he was near it, and on his left a small camp-fire was burning.

"True to his appointment," muttered Ralph.

He surmised that Jack was there waiting for him, and in a few minutes he saw that he was right.

On one side of the fire lay Jack, wrapped in slumber. On the other sat Jacob Sturmby and old Ben whispering together.

Ralph advanced with a light step, but old Ben heard him coming, and sprang to his feet, revolver in his hand, ready for use.

"An old friend," said Ralph, softly.

"It is the trapper," said Jacob, and motioned for him to come in lightly, so as not to disturb Jack.

"You bring news," said Jacob, looking keenly at him.

"I do," replied Ralph; "the two fiends are at Silver Settlement, playing high jinks. They murdered a child two mornings since, and an old woman yesterday."

"You are sure it is them?" said Jacob.

"As sure as I can be of a thing I have not seen."

"It is time they came to their end," said old Ben, with his eyes gleaming beneath his brows; "the young master and I are of the same opinion there."

"But he wants rest," said Jacob; "he's as near worn out as can be, and ain't fit to go on."

"That's a pity," said Ralph, "for it's time the dark work of these brutes was stopped."

"But it can't be done by him," said Jacob; "he isn't fit for it."

"Who says that?" interposed a voice, and Jack, who had risen quietly, stood before them.

"It's my opinion," said Jacob, with rather a dogged look; "but I know you won't mind that."

"Old friend," said Jack, laying a hand on his shoulder, "I would heed you in anything but a proposal that I

should rest now before I finish my task of vengeance."

"And yet it would be better for you if you could."

"Granted it is so, but all the same I must go on. I have heard what Ralph said, and it would be monstrous of me to lie idle while others suffer."

"But others may get the rascals, and put an end to them."

"No, Jacob. It will not be so; I feel it—I am assured of it. They may not die by my hand, but their end will be with me and through me."

"I'll not gainsay it, lad."

"I have dreamt of the finish," said Jack, with a face filled with a strange light. "It was all turmoil, bitter struggling, and ghastly shrieks. I have

seen these men die in my sleep, and, waking, I will witness their end, Ralph, rest a while, and then follow me."

"You'll not go alone," said Jacob.

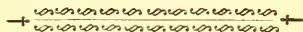
"I will walk alone to-night," answered Jack. "It is my will, for my soul is sad. I shall not miss my way. The course lies south, Ralph?"

"Due south, master," replied Ralph. "I sha'n't be far behind you."

"We will all come," said Jacob.

"As you will," said Jack, and with a firm step, and eyes fixed ahead, he left them.

The next day, late in the afternoon, all four entered the Silver Settlement, where they found everything in commotion.



CHAPTER LXI.

THE TRAIL UP THE MOUNTAIN—A SEARCH ENDING WITH A FAILURE.

ANOTHER crime had been committed. This time it was a young woman, the wife of one of the diggers, named Martin, who had been slain.

How her murder had been compassed was a mystery, for she had been slain close to her own door at high noon.

Martin's hut stood a little apart from the rest—lower down towards the wood, and the door faced away from the diggings.

To enter the house, anyone coming from the high ground had to go round, and a stranger had a chance of creeping in unobserved.

The unfortunate woman went down to get her husband's dinner, and as she did not reappear when expected, he went in search of her.

He found her lying dead, stabbed in the back, and the hut robbed of food, drink, and two or three blankets.

The perpetrators were not in view, nor had they left anything as a guide to the road they took.

But of their identity there could be no doubt.

The three crimes that had put the little community into mourning were the work of the same hands.

"But where are they hiding?" asked the maddened men and women.

In vain they searched the wood and hill. No clue could be found.

The entrance of Jack into the place caused some excitement. His story was known, and when they saw his fine face and figure, with the sombre air that hung about him, they were much impressed.

Harold Deane came forward and gave him sad welcome, inviting him to stay at his abode.

"Such rest as I shall find time for," replied Jack, "I will take beneath your roof."

"And you must have some now," said Jacob Sturmby; "four hours' rest in five days is not enough for anyone."

"Not for Hercules himself," said Harold Deane, and led Jack in.

Mrs. Deane welcomed him, too, and sighed deeply as she thought of her poor dead boy, who, if he had lived, might have grown as tall, and straight, and handsome.

"Even the sorrowful must eat," said Harold Deane, as he put food before him. "No amount of will can keep exhausted nature going."

Jack and his host ate little together, and after some converse on their respective sorrows, went to rest. Jack, tired out, slept soundly.

He did not awake until the sun was

well up, and his long repose gave him back his strength.

When he awoke, the colour of his cheeks was renewed, his limbs again elastic, and his spirit bold as ever.

"Where are my men?" he asked Harold Deane, who, hearing him move about, entered the room where he had been sleeping.

"They are without, awaiting your orders," was the reply. "Your breakfast is ready and waiting."

He could hardly be persuaded to linger for a few minutes for a little needful food, so eager was he to be upon the trail, but Mrs. Deane put in a word, and he bowed to her wishes.

Harold Deane made one of the party, so that there were five in all. The other four were, of course, Jack, Jacob Sturmby, old Ben, and Ralph.

The two latter played the part of hounds, going a little in advance, their keen and experienced eyes looking for something to guide them.

They started from Martin's hut, and made their way first to the wood. This they skirted, going first to the right, and then to the left.

"What is this?" said Ralph, pulling up beside a thornbush.

A small piece of rag, torn from some garment, was fluttering there. He took it off, and held it up.

"Anybody here wear stuff of this sort?" he asked.

Deane looked at it, and shook his head.

"A piece of red shirt, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"There isn't such a thing in the settlement. We all go in for greys."

"The Swaggerer used to wear a red shirt," said Jack. "Which way was he going, Ralph?"

"On ahead," replied Ralph; "for you see the bit of flannel was on this side of the spray, and a little under it. I should say that he was crawling."

A little farther on, old Ben suddenly pulled up.

"Footmarks here," he said.

It was a barely perceptible indentation in the stiff soil, but it was enough for experienced eyes. Ralph nodded assent.

"Boot worn," he said; "got a hole just on the ball of the foot."

"I believe we have all sound boots," said Harold Deane.

The footmark pointed out the road taken by the wearer of the boot as clearly as a signpost would have done, and other marks were soon found.

The indentations varied a little, which led Ralph to assume that they were on the trail of two persons.

"You see," he said, "the ground is soft in some places, and hard in others. These two walked side by side; sometimes one walked on a soft place, sometimes the other, so we get a variety of trail.

"That's about it," assented Ben.

It was wonderful how they kept on the track. The scent was here very strong to ordinary eyes, but sometimes was quite invisible; but Ben, or Ralph, or both, always had something clear to guide them.

So they went round some broken ground, and up the mountain again, passing the settlement on the eastern side, and hidden from it by a screen of rock and bushes.

They entered what had once been the course of a mountain torrent, and might, indeed, be so in the winter, or after a very heavy storm.

Here the two trappers found all they required, and went on without a halt or speaking a word.

One would point out a few displaced stones, or a slight pressure where sand lay, and the other would nod his head—that was all.

Grim and silent they went on like sleuth-hounds, and those behind were silent, too.

Not a word was uttered, and they trod as quietly as they could, as their quarry might be near, and, taking alarm, get clear away.

On, up the watercourse, until it suddenly widened into a basin, and they stood in comparatively open ground, with a view up and down for a considerable distance.

Only one solitary bush graced the stony ground in the circle around them, a poor, dejected, stunted specimen of vegetation, melancholy in its loneliness.

Ralph and Ben pulled up, and after a glance round, looked at each other.

"No trail," said one.

"Not a bit," said the other.

Bidding the others keep still, they went carefully round the edge of the basin, and came back with disappointed looks.

"The ground is rough," said Ralph, "but there ought to be something to help us."

"And there is nothing?" said Jack.

"Nothing."

"They are mortal," said Jacob Sturmby, "and can't have sunk into the earth."

"No," replied Ralph, "but they are gone—that's clear—gone as clean as the pool of water that was once here."

"How could a pool be formed," asked Harold Deane, "when there is that course to carry the water off?"

"Across the mouth of that course," said Ralph, "a barrier was once formed, and behind it the pool was made. When the water got too heavy it broke through."

"But even then this basin could not have been formed."

"Oh, yes, it could, for you see the barrier was broken up in a day. It may have stood a hundred years, and the water rushing from above eddied here, and overflowed, and so did its work slowly—but that's a water-basin, ain't it, Ben?"

"It ain't anything else," replied Ben.

They crossed the cup-like bottom, and went higher up. No trail was found. They harked back, and beat about to the right and left, and found no clue.

The two trappers looked at each other in despair.

"Is there no trail," said Ralph, "or am I getting past my work?"

"There's no sign to guide us," said Ben, sententiously.

It was bitterly disappointing, and as ascending the mountain might only be a waste of energy and time, they decided to return.

So they retraced their steps to the original starting-point, and sought for something else to guide them. But the day was fruitlessly spent.

Nothing was found.

"Come," said Harold Deane, as dark-

ness drew on, "let us go home. We can do no more to-night."

"I suppose not," replied Jack; "the foxes have been too cunning for us this time."

The report they gave on their return was as disappointing to the diggers as the day's work had been to themselves, and in addition a vague uneasiness prevailed.

Three murders swiftly and secretly done, without even a glimpse of the murderers, was sufficient for disquietude, and every door was well-barricaded that night.

Ben and Ralph were both dissatisfied, and neither cared to rest with the shadow of failure upon them.

"If we had found no clue, it wouldn't have been so bad," said Ralph, "but to pick it up, follow it, and lose it in such open ground is enough to make a man swear."

"Swearing is no use," said Ben; "let's talk it over."

"Go ahead, old man."

"Now it's clear that the two went up to the basin, ain't it?"

"As clear as sunshine."

"And up higher they did not go?"

"Not a foot."

"Nor to right or left?"

"They didn't; but they might have come back again—in fact, they must."

"Then we must go and look for a back trail. Suppose we do it afore the others are up?"

"I'm willing. We'll start early."

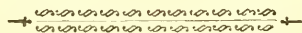
"Let us start now," said Ben. "The stars will take us up, and we sha'n't have much time to spare."

"I'm ready," said Ralph, "for I can't rest till I've got a clue to this mystery."

Rising, he opened the door of the hut where they slept, and looked out.

The heavens were full of stars; no breath of wind or sound of any sort broke the stillness.

"A good night for travelling," said Ralph; and stealthily as if they were midnight murderers themselves, they stole out, and, unheeded by the little community, went their way.



CHAPTER LXII.

THE SHOT FROM THE MOUNTAIN—A MYSTERIOUS FOE AND A BITTER LOSS.

WHEN Jack awoke and found that the two trappers had gone away on their own account, he was inclined to be angry.

But he soon remembered their zeal in his service, and saw the injustice he was guilty of.

"It is in my interest they are gone—good faithful fellows," he said to Jacob Sturmby. "And I have, in any case, no right to reproach them. Did they not say anything of their going?"

"No," replied Sturmby. "They had the small hut yonder, and I was quartered on the Martins. So we did not see anything of each other after dark."

"And, of course, you have no idea where they are gone?"

"I can only guess, Master Jack, and I reckon they are looking for the trail."

It was just light when this conversation took place, and at that moment Harold Deane came in to say that breakfast was ready.

As Jack was going in, a faint report fell upon his ear.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A shot up the mountains," replied Sturmby.

They stood still, listening for another sound, but all was silent; and Jack went into the hut with his host.

A little bread and coffee formed Jack's breakfast, for during his wandering life he had accustomed himself to the simplest fare; and having examined his revolvers, a precaution he never omitted, he arose and went out.

Jacob Sturmby was waiting for him, leaning on his rifle, with an anxious expression of face.

"Any more firing?" enquired Jack.

"No," replied Jacob; "but I fancy I heard a shout two or three times; yet it was so faint that I couldn't be certain."

"From which direction came the sound?"

"From over there—the road we took yesterday."

"It is our road to-day," said Jack.

Without waiting for anyone to join

them, they set out, and ere they had gone far, they heard an unmistakable shout.

"That's Ralph's voice," said Sturmby. "I'll answer back."

Putting his hands to his mouth, he sent forth a clear ringing cry, that echoed up and down, and on every side.

It was answered by another shout.

Scrambling hurriedly over the rocks, and ignoring the fatigue of the ascent, they hastened on, and presently saw a figure high up above them, and standing on a rock.

"Ralph," said Jack, "and alone. What does that mean?"

He saw them also, and began to wave his arms for them to hurry up.

"Something is wrong," said Jack, and, with the agility of a chamois, he bounded from rock to rock, and speedily reached the trapper's side.

He was standing on the verge of the basin where their journey of the day before had terminated, and at his feet lay old Ben, with the unmistakable signs of being mortally wounded upon him.

"What's this?" cried Jack.

"I can't tell," replied Ralph, with a despairing gesture. "We were looking about here for a trail, when I heard a shot, and saw Ben fall. That's all I know."

"And you saw no one?"

"Nobody," replied Ralph.

Jack knelt down by Ben's side, and took his hand.

"Old friend and faithful companion," he said, "I'm cut to the heart to see this."

"Don't grieve, dear lad," replied Ben. "I'm not sorry to die. I've wished for it many a day. I'm longing to join my boy."

"Such a cruel, cowardly deed!"

"The bullet's here," said Ben, touching his left side, "but I can't tell where it came from, because I'm not sartin how I was standing."

"It must have come from somebody hidden among the stones," said Ralph;

"but how the varmint got clear away puzzles me."

"Can we not help you in any way?" said Jack to Ben.

"No, dear lad," he replied, "it's too late."

"If we could get you down to the settlement, I—"

"No, dear lad, don't think of it. I'm dying, and moving would only make me uneasy. My life's running out fast. Let it go easy."

He spoke quite calmly, and now there was a beautiful light glowing in the old man's face. It was like the silver light of an eastern dawn.

There were tears in Jack's eyes as he knelt beside him, and standing close by were Jacob Sturmby and Ralph, grim and stern.

Sorrow darkened their faces, and lay like a leaden weight upon their hearts.

"I'll ask you to carry me down by-and-by," said old Ben. "I sha'n't keep you waiting long. When it's all over, take me to some quiet spot, and bury me deep, where no thing of prey can get at my bones. It's the last thing I ask of you."

"I wish I could do more for you," said Jack. "You may be mistaken, Ben. Let us take you down and see what good nursing will do for you."

"You couldn't do it," said Ben; "the bit of lead's touched my spine, and I'm no more than a broken figure of a man. Let me be, I'll go quietly, and not keep you lingering."

"Why talk in that way?" said Jack. "If you lived for weeks and months, none here would willingly desert you. The sun's getting warm. I will put something up to shade you."

"Let the sun shine on me," said old Ben; "it's a blessed thing. My boy was fond of it. Ah, I've seen the sunlight dancing in his eyes, as he wandered over the plains, and he would laugh so that his voice was better than most music. He was a dear, light-hearted lad."

"He was a brave fellow."

"So he was; and he loved me. 'Father,' he used to say, 'we two are in the world together, and we've nobody but ourselves to love. We ought to die together.' But he went first, poor boy!"

"His death will be avenged," said Jack.

"I've no thought of that now," replied the old man, his voice growing fainter.

"No, no; I suppose not."

"If we were never to meet again, it might be different, but I feel that he is coming near me. Master Jack, you've been a good friend to me."

"No, Ben; it is you who have been my friend," said Jack.

"Well, I can't argue on it, as I'm going. Whichever way it is, dying I bless you. Take my hands. I see Bill near me—I—I—my boy—my boy—the sun is on his face—I'm a coming, lad—I—"

Jack had taken his hands, and when he got thus far they suddenly closed with a convulsive movement, then relaxed, and the spirit of old Ben had left its tenement of clay.

Jack remained with head bent, and the stern-eyed men behind him saw a tear drop upon the dead man's hand. Then he suddenly looked up.

"Go down," he said, "and bring up something on which to bear him to the settlement. I will remain here until you return."

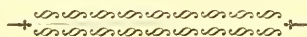
"Dear lad," said Jacob Sturmby, "there is danger in your being left alone."

"Why talk of danger to me?" asked Jack.

"But there's a hidden danger, lad—a foe that skulks."

"Jacob, you ought to know me by this time. Why do you linger? Go, both of you."

And with some misgivings in their hearts, they left him.



CHAPTER LXIII.

JACK ALONE SOLVES THE MYSTERY—HE BEARDS THE WOLVES IN THEIR DEN.

ALONE Jack stood a while, with arms folded, gazing down upon the face of the dead man. It was as placid as that of a sleeping child.

"Better for you, old man, that you should be at peace," he murmured. "But we shall miss you."

He had grown attached to Ben, with his simple manners and strong faithfulness, and the feeling had been mutual.

If such a thing as an additional stimulus to Jack had been needed, it was here supplied.

He wanted no incentive to go on to the end.

That the crime had been committed by the Panther or the Swaggerer he was as sure as if he had seen the act performed, and the mystery of it could not fail to trouble him a little.

From what hiding-place was the shot fired?

He looked around, and, apparently, there was no place that could give the assassin shelter.

The rocks were small, and only one bush was near, a stunted thing that seemed to be withering as it grew.

But what is that which moves its leaves?

Not a breath of air was stirring, and yet Jack could see it gently oscillating to and fro.

Was the solution of the mystery there?

Jack's heart beat a little faster, but, with face unmoved and form still as a statue, he watched the strange phenomenon.

The bush continued to oscillate, and its leaves to rustle.

Then it began to rise.

It bent over and fell, revealing a hole in the earth about two feet in diameter.

"I see it all, now," thought Jack.

Slowly the head and shoulders of a man emerged from the hole, and stared around. So wild, so haggard, so unnatural, had the face of that man become, that Jack at first did not know him.

But it was the Panther.

Suddenly he caught sight of Jack, stern and erect, by the dead man. With a yell that rang over the mountains he disappeared.

"So that is the Panther's lair," thought Jack. "Villains—murderers—I have you safe and sound."

Leaving the side of poor Ben, he crossed the hollow, and advanced to the strange hiding-place of the desperate man.

He saw then that the supposed bush was a branch of a tree, which they had cut off to conceal their hiding-place.

"To think that we should have been deceived by this," thought Jack. "Ralph will go mad over it."

Standing near the hole, but a little aside in case of treacherous firing, Jack called on his last foes to come forth.

"The time has come," he said, "for my pursuit of you to end. One or both of you come forth."

There was a slight movement within, but nobody appeared.

"What have you to fear?" asked Jack, scornfully. "I am alone, and you are two to one. Come forth, and let it be a duel to the death."

"You're not alone," cried the Swaggerer from within.

"Only the dead is with me," replied Jack.

"We have only your word for that," growled the Panther.

"Why will you not take it?" asked Jack. "Has it to your knowledge ever been broken?"

They offered him no answer.

"If you will not come out and fight like men," he said, "I swear that you shall be shot like dogs."

A scrambling sound within the hollow was the only reply he received. He knelt down and listened.

"The cave is deeper than I thought," he muttered; "they are retreating to the end. How even the faintest sound echoes!"

He was disposed to plunge into the cave and drive out the villains, but

hesitated, not from fear, but from common prudence.

Why should he deliberately place his life at the mercy of his foes?

And it seemed certain death to enter the cave.

To enter with a rush was impossible, owing to the narrow entrance. It could only be done by creeping in, and he must inevitably, in so doing, place himself at the mercy of his foes.

"They are caged," he thought, "and I must wait until Ralph and Jacob return."

To guard against any attempt to escape, or a cowardly shot from within, he deliberately rolled down a large stone, and closed up the mouth of the cave.

"My seal is upon you," he said, as he laid a finger upon the stone.

With quiet footsteps he returned to Ben's side, and watched there until he saw Ralph and Jacob, with a number of the men of Silver Settlement, approaching.

With eager haste he beckoned to them.

"I have found the villains," he said to Jacob and Ralph, who hurried up ahead of the rest.

"Where?" they asked eagerly.

"Ralph," said Jack, "where were your trapper's eyes? Do you see yon bush?"

Ralph stared at it for awhile, and then an oath burst from his lips.

"I'm losing my cunning," he said.

"You see all now?"

"Aye, Master Jack."

"I've covered their lair with that piece of stone, and now we must have them out."

"It can be done with smoke," said one.

When the men of Silver Settlement heard the news, they uttered fierce cries and drew their knives, but Jack bade them put their weapons up again.

"These men are *mine*," he said; "when I have avenged myself, then you may do with them what you will."

Ralph and Jacob had already gone in search of brushwood to make a fire, and some of the others joined them.

The rest laid poor Ben upon a bier they had brought with them, and covered him with blankets.

"Poor old man!" was all they said, but there was no lack of sympathy in their honest hearts.

Gladly would they, one and all, have wreaked vengeance on the murderers, but Jack had claimed them as his own, and they yielded to him.

Jack exercised a fascinating influence on all with whom he came in contact.

The pitiful nature of his early story, the terrible following, his handsome face and determined air, all tended in making him an object of deep interest.

And, besides, none could dispute the justice of his claim.

Not even Harold Deane, Merryweather, and Martin, who stood in a group, a little apart from the rest.

"If they escape him, we will put in our claim," they said.

And in gloomy silence they watched the proceedings.

Ralph, and those assisting him, soon collected a quantity of brushwood, and Jack rolled back the stone.

"Just enough to smoke them out," he said; "no more."

But when all was prepared and Jacob Sturmby ready to fire the pile, he suddenly changed his mind.

"Stay!" he cried. "I'll not descend to this even now. It is a coward's trick. They must be unearthed without it."

"How?" asked Ralph.

It was a pertinent question, and Jacob Sturmby repeated it.

"To enter that cave is certain death to the foremost," he said.

"My wrongs will be my shield," said Jack. "Why have these dogs been silent while we have worked? They are frozen with fear. Mine be the task to enter first. Let who will follow me."

"Madness!" cried Jacob Sturmby.

"Throwing away a life," said Ralph; "and if one must be wasted, let it be mine. I've nobody to leave behind me."

"Is it my wrong or yours that is to be avenged?" asked Jack. "The man who stops my way is my enemy."

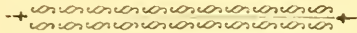
With a proud step he advanced to the hollow, coolly knelt down, and crept in.

"He goes to his death," said Jacob Sturmby, with a gesture of despair; "but there is no turning him when his

face is set to a point. He'll go, in spite of us."

"We will avenge him," groaned Ralph.

But he felt, and all there felt, that vengeance would be but a poor satisfaction for the loss of one who was so brave and true.



CHAPTER LXIV.

THE UNDERGROUND CAVES—WONDERS OF NATURE—A PERILOUS LEAP, AND DANGER LOOMING IN THE DISTANCE.

A FEW moments of suspense followed, but no shot was heard. Then Jack's voice came out of the cave with a hollow reverberation.

"Come here, Jacob."

Sturmby was already on his knees ready to follow his leader, and he crept in.

At first he could only see a great blank before him, but he could hear Jack.

"This is no common cave. It seems as if the very mountain was hollow. Listen."

Both remained quite still, and Jack's voice could be heard echoing and re-echoing far away.

"We've got a job before us," whispered Jacob. "I reckon a hundred men could hide here."

"Where they can go we can go," replied Jack; "but we can do nothing without a light."

"By what chance these skunks came on this place," muttered Jacob, as they crept out again, "is a mystery to me. Seems as if they were to escape."

"Fear not," replied Jack; "they will not escape me."

Their reappearance, unharmed, and without any signs of the foe, caused unbounded astonishment among the others. When Jack had briefly described the cave as he found it, Harold Deane said—

"I am not surprised. The whole country bears witness of ancient volcanic activity. Occasionally we have heard rumblings on cloudless days, and charged them to distant storms."

"There's a mountain about sixteen miles north," said Ralph, "that I've felt heave up at times just as if a giant was under it trying to lift it; and there's been sounds like the growling of beasts. I heard 'em about six months ago, when I crossed it."

"Well," said Jack, "we must see what volcanic action has done for this mountain. Who volunteers to explore it with me?"

They were all ready, and he chose Deane and Martin. These two, with Sturmby and Ralph, he deemed sufficient.

Then came the question as to torches, and it was remembered by Martin that there were some broken tar-barrels in the settlement, and plenty of old rope.

"All that is required," said Jack.

"I would suggest some provisions," said Deane.

"Do you think that will be necessary?"

"I do. I have heard of people losing their way in subterranean passages and starving to death."

"Do you think this cave is of that extent?"

"It might be so. Who can tell? The whole mountain may be hollow."

"In that case," said Martin, "we have a pretty game of hide-and-seek before us."

It was not necessary for all to go down to the settlement for what was required, but it was necessary to keep watch over the mouth of the cave; the latter duty Jack deputed to Jacob and Ralph.

He himself accompanied Deane and Martin to the settlement to get what they needed, for there was wisdom and forethought in Deane's words, as he afterwards discovered.

Some hours were consumed in the journey to and fro, and in the preparations.

By the time Jack was ready to re-enter the cave, afternoon had arrived.

To some of the men of Silver Settlement was left the task of guarding the exit from the cave, with express in-

junctions to secure the fugitives alive if they attempted to escape that way.

They divided themselves into two watching parties, to relieve each other every two hours until the exploring party returned, or the men sought were captured.

Jack's four followers carried sufficient provisions for two days, and their flasks were filled with weak spirit-and-water.

Their arms were a brace of revolvers and a bowie-knife.

With his own share of necessaries, Jack led the way, and in a minute or two all were in the cave.

The floor was level, but the roof rose rapidly, and half-a-dozen yards in they were able to stand upright.

Torches, of which each carried a bundle, were lit, and, with curious eyes, they scanned the way before them.

The cave extended farther than they could see, and expanded as they went.

Keeping in a line they moved on, and soon found themselves in what may be called a subterranean hall of considerable dimensions.

The roof was now so high overhead that it was invisible, and they could only surmise its elevation by the sound of their voices.

The sides could be seen glistening in the torchlight.

"They are not here," said Jack, with a disappointed face.

"Then there must be a road out of it," said Ralph.

Moving about and around, they soon came upon an opening about ten feet high from the ground, apparently the only exit from the hall, except the way they came.

Jack knelt down, thrust in his torch, and saw that the road was open.

They entered, and as before, saw that it soon became lofty; but the passage was now narrow, not admitting of the walking of more than two abreast.

"Here's a world of wealth for somebody," said Ralph, tapping the stone. "Here's some silver for you."

"A few days ago I should have gone mad with delight over this discovery," said Harold Deane, gloomily; "but now it is of no value to me."

"But we won't despise it," said Martin, with a faint smile.

Jack kept moving on, and the rest perforce followed.

Suddenly he called a halt.

"Pull up sharp!" he cried, and they all stood still.

"Just in time," he said, pointing to a chasm at his feet.

It was not more than four feet wide, but it was very deep. A loose stone he rolled over went bounding down, rolling and rumbling like thunder.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Ralph, with a shudder. "It's awful."

"We must leap it," said Jack, and lightly bounded over.

It was not the width, but the thought of the horrors that must lie down in these depths, which made the others pause.

And pause they did, so that, for a minute or two, he was alone, with that dark rent between them.

"It is nothing of a leap," he said.

"Fancy multiplies it by twelve," replied Harold Deane.

He stepped back a few paces, ran, and jumped. He only just landed on the other side, and would have fallen down, if Jack had not seized him by the arm.

"Thanks," he said, smiling. "I nearly made a bungle of it."

"It is uncanny, I admit," returned Jack; "but a child ought to laugh at the leap."

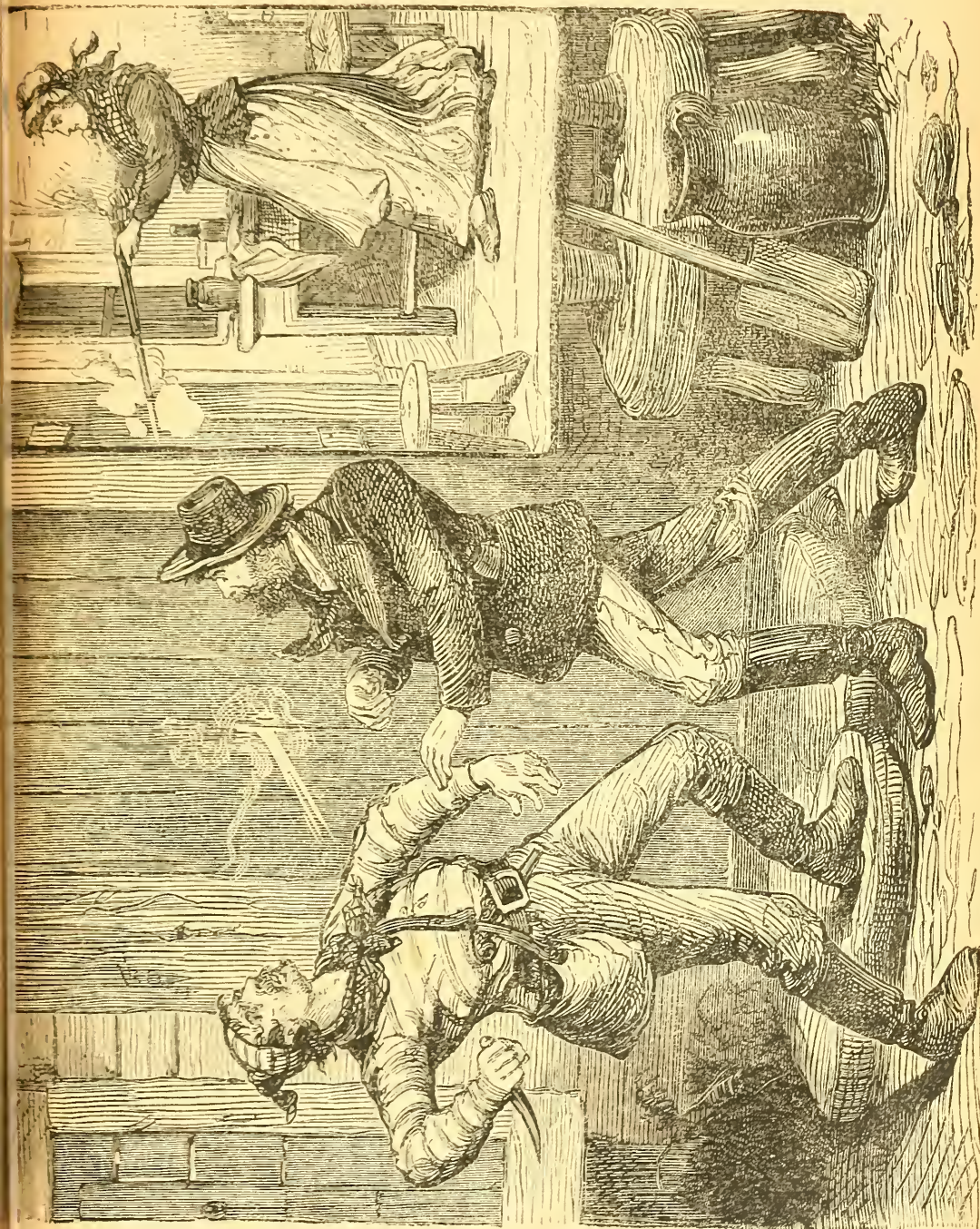
"If one knew what is at the bottom, the thing would be easier," said Deane.

Ralph was the next, and he cleared it pretty well, but it was plain that he, too, had lost nerve.

"I'd face a dozen Injuns or a grizzly bear," he said—"and I have done it afore to-day—rather than take that leap again."

Martin did not like this job, but there was only the choice of being left alone, and after two false attempts he, too, got over. A stone he dislodged with his foot rolled down, renewing the dreadful rumblings.

Their path was now very rough. Broken stones and shattered stalactites strewn the floor. It was a scramble rather than a walk, and more than one tumble took place ere they got to better ground.



"A HOWL OF PAIN AND FURY RANG FROM THE PANTHER'S LIPS."

A second widening brought them to another cave or hall, with stalactites hanging in great profusion from the roof. Some of the points of these extraordinary productions of Nature were within reach, others were sixty feet above.

It was a weird-looking spot, and it seemed as if it was more than probable that some of the spikes would fall and impale them; so they hurried on and crossed this mysterious workshop of Nature, and came to another passage, really an underground rift in the heart of the mountain.

And up to this time they had found no signs of the men they sought.

Jack paused.

"Are we really on their track?" he asked.

He spoke generally, but his eyes were on Ralph, who answered, shrugging his shoulders—

"I am out of my line here. The trail must be very broad for me to see it."

"How long have we been walking?" asked Jack.

Harold Deane carried a watch, to which he referred.

"We started at half-past three," he said, "and it is now twenty minutes past four."

"Making allowances for stoppages and obstacles," said Jack, "we must have travelled nearly two miles."

It was an awe-inspiring revelation, and they looked at each other in silent amazement.

"How many torches have been burnt?" asked Jack.

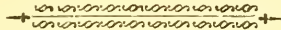
"Three apiece," replied Ralph, "and we have used twelve."

"How many have we left?"

"About two dozen."

"Carry only two, and let us hurry on. The end of this series of gigantic caverns cannot be far away."

Two torches were extinguished, and with two burning they moved forward swiftly and silently.



CHAPTER LXV.

ON THE TRAIL WITHOUT A TRAIL—THE SECRET FORCES OF NATURE—NO THOROUGHFARE.

It was a narrow dismal way they now trod. The melancholy of it cannot be described.

In the first place it was narrow, and in the second the air was close and stifling.

Ralph's keen nostrils detected a slight odour of sulphur.

"I don't think there is any outlet from here. This air isn't fresh enough," he said.

"All the better," replied Jack, "our men cannot escape us."

"For my part," remarked Harold Deane, "I cannot think they came this way. They cannot walk in darkness; now how could they go on without light?"

"That's something worth thinking of," said Jack, pausing; "it never occurred to me."

It was a thought that was very dispiriting, and gloom and doubt settled upon the little party. The result of

their search now assumed a very problematical character.

"If we go back," said Jack, "we may be throwing away our chance of securing the villains when within our reach."

"If we go on," said Deane, "we may be leaving them behind us."

"Can we possibly have done so?"

"It occurs to me that there may be many hiding-places in these caves."

"But there is no exit for them without being captured," said Jack; "let us go on."

As he led, they followed, but there was not a very strong hope now in either leader or followers. It seemed impossible, or nearly impossible, for the Swag-gerer and the Panther to have retreated so far.

The road which had hitherto been fairly level, though broken in places, now began to descend rapidly, and the incline each moment increased until at last they had to move warily.

The air, too, grew warmer, and now the sulphurous odour was palpable to all.

A feeling that they had had enough of this gruesome journey was growing on Jack's followers, but he, with renewed determination, kept on. He was bent on seeing the end of the road.

Down, down, many fathoms deep, the air getting warmer and warmer, the sulphurous odour increasing.

The torches having burnt low, they paused to light others. While thus engaged, a low hissing sound fell upon Jack's ear.

"Be silent for a moment," he said; and they all stood still, holding their very breath.

Yes, the sound was there below them. A deadly hiss like the warning sound from the mouth of a monstrous serpent.

"This is horrible," said Martin, shuddering; "we're near to the lair of some monster in the bowels of the earth."

"Let us see what the monster is like," said Jack.

They all palpably held back, but Jack, with a dogged face, pursued his way.

With dark dread in their hearts, they slowly resumed their journey.

Down, down, with the hiss growing louder and louder, and the sulphurous smell becoming unbearable.

"Master Jack, if we go any farther we shall all be poisoned."

It was Ralph who spoke, and Jack answered him.

"Hold up your torches. There is the serpent in its lair."

They advanced, and holding up their torches, saw that they were now in an open space, and before them a sheet of water gently steaming.

Farther on it appeared to be boiling and bubbling.

Above them, overhead, was a cloud of steam.

"One of the agencies of volcanic eruptions," said Harold Deane. "Where there is a vent, we have the volcano. If there is none, the earthquake comes as soon as sufficient force to rend or rock the earth is stored."

"This way," said Jack; "we can go no farther. The water touches the rocks right and left."

There was no doubt of it.

They were doomed to disappointment.

There was either another road or their quarry was in hiding.

It was a bitter blow to Jack, and with a gloomy face he led the way back.

They reached the chamber of stalactites, and, as they thought, returned by exactly the way they came.

There was the opening, so it seemed, by which they entered, and Jack, entering, went forward with confidence.

It wound a little here and there, and by-and-by he began to think that there were strange features in the walls he had not observed before—fissures, projections, and water dripping from rock to rock.

But he went on until he was pulled up by Ralph saying—

"This isn't our road. We have not been here before."

They paused without any feeling of dismay.

If they had indeed come wrong, it would be easy to retrace their steps.

Five minutes, or ten at the outside, would enable them to reach the cave again.

"Let us make sure," said Jack.

After a little wandering to and fro, they decided that they had come wrong, and turned backward.

Nothing seemed easier than to find the cave again.

But they wandered on and on, and did not reach it in the time they expected they would, and Jack pulled up.

"Have we passed any opening on the way?" he asked.

"It isn't easy to say," replied Ralph. "The torches give such an uncertain light."

And so it was. A flickering flame is always an uncertain guide, and the subterranean passage had widened and narrowed, in some places gradually, in others abruptly, so that, taking all things together, it was probable that many passages had escaped their notice.

Blankly they stared at each other, dismay in their hearts.

Jack was the first to rally himself.

"If we have really made a mistake," he said, "we had better rectify it at once."

"The torches can't last many hours," hinted Harold Deane.

Their peril was indeed something to cause the stoutest heart to quail.

What would become of them if they did not succeed in reaching the outer air before their means of getting light were exhausted?

A slow and terrible death seemed to be the only end to their adventure.

It was galling to Jack, too, having failed in his search.

He had no doubt about the Swaggerer and the Panther having, by their cunning, escaped him for a time, and if he perished in that gloomy place the triumph would be theirs.

His heart was very bitter, but he did not allow his anger to master his head. Coolly he arranged the plan for escape.

"Now that we are here," he said, "we will go on. By-and-by we may find our way back to a familiar spot."

They started again with hopeful hearts, but a long and weary wandering through a series of narrow tunnel-like passages brought them to nothing better than a small cave which they had never seen before.

It was the termination of their journey in this direction, for there was no other means of egress except through a narrow opening of a few inches high.

This could be of no service to them, and had evidently been made by a spring that bubbled near, as the water escaped that way.

They laved their faces and drank at the spring.

Afterwards they took a portion of food, and to save the precious torches, blew them out, and ate in the dark.

It was the strangest meal, perhaps, that was ever partaken of by five persons. But they all had need of food, and ate heartily.

"A novel dining-room," said Harold Deane. "I wonder what depth we are?"

"Some hundreds of feet down," replied Ralph. "Near the level ground at the foot of the mountain, or it may be, under it."

"It's an awful business," said Martin.

"Keep cool," said Jack. "Our hope of escape lies in our nerve. Let us take things easy. Before we go on, I think you had better smoke."

Tobacco is a great boon to toiling men, and a pipe of the familiar weed had a beneficial effect upon Jack's followers.

He smoked a single cigarette, then sat thoughtful and silent until the torches were relighted.

"How many have we left?" he asked.

"Only twelve," said Ralph.

"How long do they burn?"

"About half-an-hour," said Deane.

"That, with two burning, gives us but three hours' light," said Jack.

"We must economise with one."

"It will only make darkness visible," murmured Deane.

With one torch they harked back through the narrow ways. Sometimes they came to great fissures in the walls that looked like passages, and went down them with the hope of finding a way to light and air.

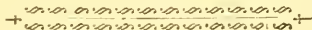
Three of them came to an abrupt termination, and, disheartened, they returned to the original route, to lose even that in the end, and find themselves in a complete underground maze.

They stood in an open spot upon a pile of broken rock. On the right and left, and around them, were the strange fissures radiating with almost the regularity of the spokes of a wheel.

"Which way now?" asked Deane, and Jack did not answer.

"It has been tiring work," said Martin, after a pause, "and I, for one, am near tired out."

"We had better lie down and have some sleep," said Jack. "Choose where you will lie, and Ralph put out the torch."



CHAPTER LXVI.

FURTHER ADVENTURES UNDERGROUND—AN ACCIDENT—DISASTER AND DEATH IMPENDING.

STRANGE as it may seem, they all slept. Not even the deadly peril ahead, each minute growing darker and deeper, could keep their weary eyelids open.

Their couch was a bed of stone, but, for the time, it was as down to one and all.

Ralph was the first to awake.

On opening his eyes he thought at first that he was enjoying familiar rest upon the plain, and looked above him for the stars.

"Dark as pitch," he muttered, "but no rain as yet."

Then the true state of things flashed upon him, and he started into a sitting position.

Inky darkness surrounded him. For aught that he could see he was alone.

But hard-by his friends were sleeping, and their breathing fell softly and gratefully upon his ear.

"I've slept long enough," he muttered, "but I'll not disturb them."

So he lay still, thinking and trying to make the best of their perilous position, hoping on, he secretly feared, against hope.

His meditations ere long were disturbed by a sound that he had at first thought was the roar of a distant beast.

But a slight shaking of the ground dispelled this idea, and the dread truth burst upon him.

"It is the warning note of an earthquake," he said, and he felt his hair stiffen with horror.

"Wake up!" he said. "We are in danger of earthquakes."

They were awake and on the alert in a moment. Jack asked him what he said.

"Earthquake coming," said Ralph.

As he spoke, the roaring sound was heard again, and the ground trembled.

"Light a torch," cried Jack.

It was done by Harold Deane. Martin's hand shook so that he was unable to perform that office.

As its glare fell upon their faces they could see that all were ghastly pale.

"The sound came from that direction," said Jack, pointing down one of the openings. "We had better fly direct from it."

He took the torch himself, and led the way, running quickly. They all followed with as much speed as they could make.

"It will soon be every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost," muttered Deane.

Martin stumbled and fell, cutting his forehead badly.

When Ralph picked him up, he stared about him wildly.

"Are you much hurt?" asked Jack.

He muttered something of a confused nature in reply, and leaned against the wall, sick and faint.

Ralph put his whisky-flask to his lips, and he drank some of its contents, but he made no effort to go on.

"Try and keep with us," said Jack; "we must get on."

Martin only stared about him, quite unconscious of where he was.

Again was heard that dreadful rumbling, and the walls of the cavern palpably rocked.

A cry that was half a groan, burst from Jack's lips.

"It is I who have brought you here," he said. "Forgive me."

"Dear lad," said Jacob Sturmby, "you must not talk so to us. For my part, I'll not grumble if I have to die with you."

"Nor I," said Ralph.

"It is my poor wife that I think of," groaned Harold Deane. "What will she do in the world alone?"

"All is not lost yet," said Jack, with compressed lips. "Martin, drink some of that. Now, my good fellow, do you feel better?"

"It's too early to go to work," replied Martin, vacantly. "There's only the moon to see by."

"Nevertheless," said Jack, "you must come out with me."

He took him by the arm, and led him a little way. Again he pulled up.

"It's all nonsense," he said. "We shall be better at home and in bed."

Jack begged of him to go on, but a sudden obstinacy took possession of him.

"I'll go when I please, and not before," he said. "You let me alone."

"What shall we do with him?" asked Jack.

"He's had a nasty knock," said Deane. "Perhaps he will be better in a few minutes."

The earth shook and rumbled once more, and was followed by a noise like the firing of guns on a far-off battlefield.

There was a rush of air, and the torch was extinguished.

"Stand firm," said Jack; "do not be alarmed."

With a steady hand he struck a match, and applied it to the torch. Fear was

in the hearts of the others, but they stood erect, grim and silent.

Jack again took Martin's arm, and the man allowed himself to be led away. By-and-by he began to sing a bacchanalian song.

"Hush," said Jack, "this is no time for singing."

"When are we to sing, then?" asked Martin.

"When we get home," returned Jack, "we will be merry then."

"Shall we ever be merry again?" asked Deane. "There it is again."

The noise was louder now, and was followed by the crashing of falling rocks.

"These underground ways were opened by earthquakes, and by earthquakes they will be closed," thought Jack. "At the best we can only be killed outright. I pray that it may be so. It will be better than a living tomb."

In either case it was horrible, and to

Jack there came a powerful longing for life. A vision of Annie Newcombe uprose before him, and a stifled groan reached his lips.

"Will she miss me very much?" he thought. "Perhaps she may not hear of my fate, and think that I have been untrue to her."

This thought was very hard to bear, for Annie had become part of his existence, and as a weary traveller espies a haven of rest at the end of a long journey, so Jack looked towards Annie as a source of comfort and peace when his work of vengeance was over.

But now how much lay between him and liberty! How far off, how hopeless, was the prospect of ever seeing her again!

And as he shook off the agony of that thought, the earth shook again, and there was a roaring sound in the cavern, like the sound of an angry sea dashing upon a rocky shore.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THOSE IN HIDING—THE WATCHERS WITHOUT—A CARELESS SENTINEL.

AND all this time where were those two arch-villains, the Swaggerer and the Panther?

As Jack feared, and actually found out when too late, they had made good their escape, so far as the five pursuers were concerned, by doubling.

The depths of the caverns they had never explored, nor had they any idea of their vastness.

Their experience was confined to about two hundred yards from the narrow mouth.

They discovered their hiding-place when prowling about, as much like two wild beasts as men can be, in search of a den.

The Panther was the first to see, and, in sheer mockery, suggested its being explored.

"There's something that will suit your heart, Swaggerer," he said, "which originally belonged to a mouse, I should think. Go and see what is inside it."

"Go yourself," muttered the Swaggerer.

"Come, no mutiny," said the Panther,

"or I shall let you know who is captain here. I've only just got my promotion, and am too proud of it to let others treat it with contempt."

"I don't treat you with contempt."

"Then obey me. Go and see what is inside that hole."

"I suppose I must humour you," said the Swaggerer, with a forced laugh.

He went to the place and thrust his head in, perceiving instantly that here was indeed a true hiding-place.

"Panther," he said, "come here. I think it will suit."

"Then live there by yourself."

"Don't be a fool; it's a regular cave."

The Panther incredulously went over and examined it in his turn. His delight was unbounded.

"The very crib," he said.

They crept in and inspected the place for a short way with great delight.

To add to their joy, it was apparent that the earth round about the mouth had but recently fallen in, and in all probability they were the first discoverers of the place.

"With a bush stuck in the hole," said the Panther, "who is to find us?"

The correctness of this remark our readers know. From that place they crept out to murder little Hugh. To that place they returned when the crime was committed.

So again with Merryweather's mother and Martin's wife, and from its secret recess they shot poor old Ben.

About thirty yards from the mouth there was a slight hollow in the wall not bigger than a good-sized cupboard.

In the ordinary way a person entering the cave would have passed it by. It was only when their eyes grew accustomed to the dim light that they perceived it.

When Jack discovered them, and boldly determined to unearth them, they could have shot him as he entered, but the old belief of his having a charmed life held them back.

In addition there was the prospect of safety.

"Let us hide here," said the Panther, "and when he and his men—curse them all!—are gone by, we will cut and run."

But all the men did not come in, and when Jack went out again, he left a guard at the mouth while he went down to the settlement.

When he returned, he re-entered with only a few followers, and when, having given him time to get away down into the caverns, the Panther crept out, he saw that the guard was still there.

Four men stood facing the cave's mouth with their rifles in their hands ready to stop the retreat of the Panther and Swaggerer, and at least a dozen others were lounging about.

The road of exit was fairly barred.

"What shall we do now?" asked the Panther.

"Wait and see if we get a chance to clear out."

"That's always your cry," growled the Panther: "'Wait and see.' I'm for a shot at one of them, and then a rush for it."

"We can't rush out of this rat-hole," said the Swaggerer.

"Well, I'll wait, then," the Panther said, and squatting down, he deliberately struck a match and lit his pipe.

"On my word," said the Swaggerer, "I think you are mad at times."

"Mad! What do you mean?"

"Lighting your pipe. It's a wonder they didn't see you."

"It so happens that they didn't."

"But they may smell it."

"Let them," said the Panther. "This is some of the tobacco that belonged to the fellow whose wife we settled. It's as good as any I've had for months."

"You like this sort of bounce," the Swaggerer muttered. "It's all show off."

"Say that again," snarled the Panther, "and I'll drag you outside and let them take us both. I'm commanding officer, and can capitulate when I please."

"You would never do that."

"Oh, yes, I would, and grin when they tortured me, if they would only let me see them torture you."

"I wish you would be more reasonable," said the Swaggerer, with a groan.

"Reasonable!" returned the Panther. "You are a beauty to talk of reason! Perhaps you would reason with those fellows outside if they caught you?"

"No. What would be the use?"

"None. They would take us and strip us, and rend the flesh from our bones. If I were in their place I would do so. Then I would rasp the flayed flesh with bristly brushes, and cut and slash, but not kill, until the tortures of the accursed would be as nothing compared to it."

"Have done with it," the Swaggerer said, with a freezing sensation in his veins. "It's no use anticipating an evil before it comes."

"And it will come," returned the Panther, who always delighted in tormenting his companion.

The hours passed very slowly to the pair of scoundrels, and Jack did not return. His long absence gave an idea of the extent of the cavern; and the hope that he had lost his way, or met with an accident, temporarily brightened the lot of the Swaggerer and his friend.

"I have thought that the cave was a mammoth one," said the former. "It echoes and rumbles at the slightest sound."

"Send it may be too big for them

ever to find their way back again," muttered the Panther.

"It would be a good joke for them to come upon Pluto in his realm."

"And who is Pluto?"

"The King of Hades."

"Oh, is he," growled the Panther. "Then we are likely to meet him some day. It's growing dark outside."

And so it was. The day was over, the sun gone down, and the stars were beginning to peep out from the sky. Anxiety had taken possession of the watchers outside.

"What's come to them?" they asked each other.

"Fallen into some trap," said another.

"What can we do to help them?"

"Nothing."

What could they do, indeed? All the leading spirits of the community had gone into the cave, and those outside were no more than so many sentries at their post.

They had been told to keep watch and await the return of the others, and it was only this they could do.

It certainly required more than ordinary courage to enter the narrow-mouthed cave, and the stimulus which led Jack to lead the way was wanting in those he left behind.

They lit a fire as the sun fell, and gathered round it, leaving one man to watch the cave.

He paced up and down with a rifle resting on his arm, occasionally stopping to listen.

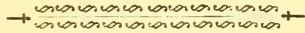
All within the cave was dark and silent.

"Perhaps it's like a rabbit-burrow," he thought, "more ways out of it than one."

The idea in his opinion was a good one, and he walked over to his comrades to lay it before them.

The moment his back was turned, the Panther glided out, and the Swaggerer swiftly followed him.

The sentinel was not a minute from his post, but that time sufficed for the Swaggerer and the Panther to get down the mountain and clear away.



CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE CRIME FRUSTRATED.

"DONE 'em this time!" chuckled the Panther. "They don't get everything their own way."

"Not quite—nor do we," returned the Swaggerer.

He paused a moment, and looked back at the glow of the fire high above them. All seemed quiet there, and they laughed softly over their escape.

"That fellow was kind to us," said the Panther. "Now, I've an idea, Swaggerer."

"What is it?"

"All the men of the settlement are up there."

"Seems so."

"Well, if that's the case, only women and children are down there."

"No, Panther—no more of it."

"I say yes. We'll leave our mark upon them. I'm bent on finishing with a regular blaze of fireworks. I'd like to be let loose on a children's school just now."

"I shouldn't mind if there was no danger," replied the Swaggerer; "but there's no safety here. Let us get away."

"I'll do a little business in the settlement first," said the Panther, doggedly.

He moved on, and the Swaggerer perforce followed. Rebellion was too risky, and his only chance of safety lay in obedience, for the Panther was a desperate brute, and if angered, might do anything.

The evil of this half-bred gipsy's nature had lately developed amazingly, and even the Swaggerer was appalled by the intense remorseless ferocity he exhibited.

But as Norton Gray, *alias* Hiram Crayton, *alias* the Swaggerer, had sown, so he was reaping, and the harvest was a heavy one.

"What would I give to go back a

few years!" he thought, as he sullenly plodded on behind his companion.

Ere long they saw the lights in the huts below, and the Panther led the way to a point from which they had watched before without being seen.

Nobody was moving below. The women and children were housed for the night.

"Panther," said the Swaggerer, touching him on the arm, "let us go on."

"Not till I've left another mark upon them," was the ferocious answer.

"But where's the good of it?"

"I'm going to settle the mother of that boy—Deane, isn't her name?"

"Will you stop at that?"

"Yes."

"Then go, and I'll wait for you here."

"Not if I know it. We go together, and share in this, as we have shared in everything."

It was cowardice that held the Swaggerer back, not remorse or pity for the intended victims.

With an ashen face and shaky limbs, he accompanied the Panther to Harold Deane's hut, known to both.

It had an unglazed window, closed with a shutter at night; but there were crevices in it through which streamed the light within.

The Panther softly tried the door with his hand.

It was fast.

"They are suspicious," he muttered.

Turning to the Swaggerer, he asked him if he thought he could imitate Deane's voice.

"Not so as to deceive her," replied the Swaggerer.

"I'll try another move," said the Panther, and tapped lightly at the door.

"Who's there?" asked Mrs. Deane within.

"A neighbour," replied the Panther. "You are wanted up the mountain."

They heard her moving towards the door, and the Panther turned his grinning face towards the Swaggerer.

But the next moment he ceased to grin.

Mrs. Deane discharged a rifle, and the bullet passed through the door, striking him in the shoulder.

A howl of pain and fury rang from the Panther's lips as he staggered forward against the Swaggerer.

"So, Mr. Wolf," said Mrs. Deane, "I've hit you."

"Let me get at her," hissed the Panther. "Don't hold me."

"Come away," hurriedly cried the Swaggerer; "the whole place is alarmed, and I hear the men coming down the mountain."

"But I must get at her. I want revenge."

"You can't have it," replied the Swaggerer, dragging him down the slope.

In a fever of fear he bore the infuriated Panther to the wood on the outskirts of which they murdered little Hugh, and there he loosed his hold.

"It's no good running such a mad risk," he said; "it was a fool's idea."

"Who would have thought it of the hag?" snarled the Panther.

"Not to be caught napping again," said the Swaggerer; "let me look at your wound."

The Panther, groaning and cursing, opened his shirt, and with the aid of the Swaggerer, released one arm and laid the shoulder bare.

"You bleed freely," he said, "and I don't think a little blood-letting will hurt you."

"What do you mean?" asked the Panther.

"You are too hot-headed—you want cooling."

"I'll be too hot-headed and too hot-handed for some of them before I've done. My work is only just begun. Bind it closer, Swaggerer. It isn't the place to throttle me."

"I've done my best," replied the Swaggerer; "but you must keep still. Listen! What is that?"

"The hounds—they are giving mouth. Go on. I'm strong for running. Let us try the old game. Double, Swaggerer, and go round by the old road, and up the mountain."

"That strikes me as a mad game."

"It is my game. Let that suffice for you."

The shouting of men, and the voices of women could be distinctly heard above, and lights were seen moving about.

Ere the Swaggerer and Panther had got far, some men, bearing torches, were coming towards the wood.

The two fugitives did not exactly double back upon their old road, but took one that ran between the two mountains; that on which the Silver Settlement was situated and an adjoining one.

The latter was known as Black Mountain, owing to its sterile, forbidding aspect. It appeared to be absolutely without use to man.

Neither fruit, flowers, nor trees grew upon it, and exploring parties in search of mineral wealth had one and all been doomed to disappointment.

Rugged, barren, broken, and forbidding, it reared its dark crown against the sky.

An object of aversion and even hatred to the trappers and Indians.

It was this mountain that Ralph passed over and felt it rocking beneath his feet.

Slumbering volcanic agencies were undoubtedly beneath it.

Towards this the Panther finally bent his steps, guided in that direction by the danger that lay on the other road.

Many of the men had come down to the settlement, but all had not deserted their post by the cave.

A few still watched, and the watch-fire burned bright.

So the Panther, with his aching wound and bitter heart, hurried towards the Black Mountain.

A suggestion from the Swaggerer that they should rather seek the plains, he received with angry contempt.

"The plains," he said, "would be a happy hunting-ground for that lot. They would run us down in a few hours. On the hills we shall find a hundred hiding-places."

The way was rugged, and fatigue soon began to tell upon him.

Inured to many hardships, he could not fight against loss of blood.

"I must rest, Swaggerer," he said, sitting down upon a stone; "give me that flask of yours."

"It's empty," replied the Swaggerer.

"Don't lie, but hand over."

"There isn't much in it."

What there was the Panther drank, and now they were without food or drink.

Without some change in their lot, death was within measurable distance.

The moon was high above their heads, and looked down upon them coldly and pitilessly.

The Panther, in impotent fury, shook his fist at her silvery face.

"A curse upon all things," he growled: "on the day that I first saw life, on the day I now look upon—on all men and women and living things!"

"What do you think your curse is worth?" sneered the Swaggerer.

"It's a comfort to breathe it," returned the Panther.

He was hit in the left shoulder, and his left arm was stiffening.

An attempt to raise his hand to his face gave him exquisite pain.

"I wish I could share this with you," he said, savagely. "Why the deuce couldn't the woman hit us both?"

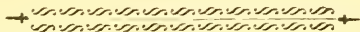
"Would that have been any satisfaction to you?"

"Yes; a lot."

The Swaggerer walked up and down, and said no more to his churlish companion until he rose to his feet.

"I've got the staggers," he said; "give me your arm, Swaggerer."

With a surly growl, the Swaggerer complied with his request, and slowly they wended their way over the broken road, at the end of which they were to meet their doom.



CHAPTER LXIX.

THE LAST TORCH—THE WATERCOURSE—LIGHT IN THE DISTANCE.

Twice had the party within the cave heard the rumbling, followed by the dread tremblings that herald an approaching earthquake, and it would be

idle to say that fear had not taken possession of them.

As a body they would not have quailed before man, but in proximity to

a mightier power—it might be in the very home of it—greater than aught connected with man, is it to be wondered at that their spirits sank?

The intricate roads and underground paths in which they were, added to the surrounding horror, and they hastened on with waning hope.

Now here, now there, this way and that, they went, sometimes to find the way blocked, and sometimes to discover that they had returned to a spot but recently left.

A miserable, sad, and bewildering journey.

At last the crisis which all had dreaded came.

Ralph paused, with an expiring torch in his right hand, and an unlit one in his left. He looked at Jack.

"What shall I do?" he asked.

"Is it the last?" said Jack.

"The last!"

"It must be lit. We are only wasting time and strength in loitering."

So it was lit, and once more they set out, Jack feverishly hurrying on. But whither was he going?

He knew not, and none could even guess. It was possible that every step might be taking them farther away from the possibility of escape.

How they watched the burning torch, and noted how it wasted and wasted, begrudging every spark that fell.

Lower and lower it burnt, until only a few inches were left in Ralph's hand.

"It will soon be out," he said.

"And after that?" groaned Jacob Stormby.

"Darkness."

The word echoed mournfully around them like the sound of a distant passing-bell.

Darkness in such a place! Was it not synonymous with death?

To grope about there unaided by light, to perish inch by inch, to go mad with despair.

Surely the rent earth and the appalling voice of the earthquake, with the falling rock to crush out the miserable life, were the better fate.

"It's going," said Ralph, and they all stopped to look upon the flickering torch.

The flame swayed to and fro, subsided

for a moment, then flickered up and was gone.

In silence they stood a while in the darkness, no man able to speak.

It was Jack who broke the portentous stillness.

"Only death can come now," he said; "the worst in other respects is here."

"We can only rely upon you," Harold Deane said. "We are nothing in ourselves."

"The blind find their way," rejoined Jack, "why should not we? Place your hands against the wall to the left, and follow me. Every minute or so I will speak. Then let all answer me."

So they began to grope their way, and covered more ground than they hoped for. Every now and then Jack would speak.

"Are all here?"

"All," they would answer, and so go on.

If time crawled before, it halted incessantly now, and occasionally appeared to stand still. Hours seemed to have passed when Jack called halt.

"All here?"

"All."

"Rest a little, and smoke if you will."

They still had a sufficiency of matches to afford the outlay of two or three to light their pipes with, and soon the cavern was faintly illumined with the burning tobacco.

Resting on the ground, they smoked in sad silence, Jack, who stood erect, listening to every sound.

Suddenly he bade them hold their very breath and listen.

They did so, and heard a faint bubbling sound.

"Water," said Ralph.

"Just so," returned Jack; "trickling from the ground above. We must find it, and work our way by it if we can. Stay here."

They heard him go stumbling on ahead, and presently heard him shout—

"I've found it!"

"And little good it will do us, I'm thinking," muttered Deane.

"It's about our last chance, I reckon," said Ralph.

They put out their pipes, and after some blundering over loose stones, found their way to Jack.

"The stream," he said, "is fully a

foot wide, and runs swift and strong. From this I argue that it has an open course from the land above, and does not filter through."

"Good argeyment," said Ralph.

"By placing my hand in it, I find which way it runs, and our upward way is clear."

Hope once more took possession of them, and they set forward again.

A gradual incline by the side of the water gave them an easy path.

But it was so pitchy dark that they were constantly blundering into the stream, so that, in a few minutes, not one of them was dry shod.

"But what matters?" said Jack. "I've borne more for a less welcome friend without grumbling."

So up and up they went, with the sensation of the air growing each moment lighter. Hope was very strong within them now.

"A light ahead!" cried Ralph.

It was more of a gasp than a cry that sprang from his lips. The others looked, and saw nothing.

"You are fancying it, Ralph," said Jack.

"No, no," said the old trapper; "I've eyes like a cat, and can see the faintest gleam of light. There it is again! Now I have it—now it's lost. There it is, clear ahead. Moonlight, as I'm a man mercifully spared."

They all looked, and saw ahead an oval-shaped patch of light that might have been a silver shield hung up in the darkness.

But Ralph understood its nature.

"Yon's the mouth of the cave," he said, "and we are saved men. Master Jack, keep it right afore you. Don't lose it for a moment."

Jack answered with a glad shout, and ignoring many a stumbling, hurried on, and, breathless with eager haste, emerged from the mouth of the cave, into which the little rivulet that had saved them ran.

It was all so sudden that they could scarcely believe their eyes.

Before them was a deep valley, and a mountain towering to the sky. Overhead the moon and stars.

For a few moments all stood still, too

thankful for their wondrous escape to give vent to their joy in words.

Instinctively they all removed their hats, and stood with their heads bent down, feeling like men risen from the dead.

"If ever I go ten feet underground again while I live," said Ralph, "may it be my fate to remain there."

"It is an experience to be remembered in after years," said Harold Deane.

"While we live," added Jack.

"I know this country," said Ralph; "yon's the Black Mountain, here behind us is the Silver Mountain, and on the other side is the settlement."

"We've come right through the mountain," said Deane.

"As near as may be."

"We must get back," said Jack; "our friends will be anxious about us."

"Dear lad," said Ralph, "the road round is a winding one—a good twelve miles to the settlement. You can't do it."

"I can and will," said Jack. "Let them rest who choose; I go on."

"If you will you must," said Ralph, "and I'll go with you."

But Jack insisted that he should remain.

"I can see," he said, "that you are all worn out with fatigue and excitement, while I seem to have had my vigour renewed. A feeling is on me that prompts me to believe that the end of my long journey of vengeance is at hand."

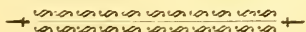
"But suppose you meet your foes?" said Deane. "They are two to one."

"I may not meet them," said Jack, "nor do I see how it could be so. But something within me says 'Go on,' and I must go, and go alone."

"We will rest a bit and follow," said Deane.

In truth they were all worn out, except the wondrous youth who had been their leader, and with him it did indeed seem as if he had received new strength.

"It is not easy to miss my way if I keep the Silver Mountain on the right," he said, and, with a strangely buoyant step, left them.



CHAPTER LXX.

THE WEIRD JOURNEY—TWO FIGURES IN THE DISTANCE—AT LAST.

It was a weird country that Jack passed through, and looked doubly so in the pale moonlight.

To Jack it seemed as if there was something in the atmosphere that was not always there—a haze that was not a haze—a light that was not a light.

He had not seen the like before, and was disposed to charge it to his many hours' sojourn in the bowels of the earth.

But as he covered the ground, and saw no change in the indescribable, indefinable effect, he began to marvel at the phenomena more and more.

The moon was there, but it was not her light that lay upon the rocky ground.

The stars were above, but it was not their gleaming that sparkled on the spare herbage.

What was it?

Again, too, there was a dreadful stillness, a silence that was not of the earth, a suspension, as it were, of all things that moved, save Jack himself.

The echo of his footsteps was unlike anything he had ever heard before. Sharp and clear it sounded, like a succession of smart raps.

His ear was pained by the sound ere he had gone far, and now and then he would pause to get relief from the silence.

Then he would look up at the moon, and marvel at her strange appearance, and the phosphorescent light there was everywhere.

"It is more like a dream than reality," he said, and the adventures of the past ten hours occurring to his mind, helped to make him doubtful whether he was awake or dreaming.

But he kept moving on along the winding road, with the swift light step of youth, and by-and-by came within sight of two distant objects that he saw at a glance were human beings.

Two men, one standing up, the other sitting down—the Swaggerer and the Panther.

Jack could not recognise them, they were too far off for that, but it flashed

upon him that these were the very men whom he had been seeking.

It was a lonely place, and they were two to one. Would it avail him if he demanded fair play?

No. Of them nothing but cowardice and treachery could be expected. But he went on.

He walked now so swiftly and quietly that he was upon them ere they were aware of his being near. He came upon them like a spectre from the mists of the weird night.

The Swaggerer was standing, and the Panther sitting down, when he came up. They stared at him, but neither spoke nor moved.

Mortal terror held them in its chains. "You have fled in vain from me," said Jack. "I am here!"

But still neither moved nor spoke. Like frozen men were they.

"For a long time," continued Jack, "I have been on your trail. It was easily followed, for it was a broad way of blood. The air was black with your crimes; these woods and plains have echoed with the cries of your victims."

He stood with his arm extended, and a finger pointed at them as he denounced their crimes. They heard and shuddered, but made no other movement.

To them the youth had borne a charmed life. He was the avenger, backed up by a mighty power they could not cope with. They felt that their hour had come.

"Murderers of children and women, cruel brutes, that shame all that is cruel in beasts, have you nothing to say to me?"

He raised his voice a little, and it echoed round as his footsteps had done, sharp and clear.

On the listeners, every word fell like a blow.

It was a weird scene.

The time, the strange light in the air and on the earth, the meeting of such a trio—all things were in one inspiring harmony.

"Have you nothing to say to me?"

On the question being repeated, the Swaggerer found tongue.

"What can we say?" he asked.

"Aye," repeated Jack, bitterly, "what could you say?"

"If I told you I was sorry for my sins, you would not believe me."

"No."

"If I told you that I have lived the life of a haunted man, and that for every crime I have committed I have paid a tenfold penalty, you would laugh at me."

"I am in no humour for laughing," said Jack.

"You would deride me, then," said the Swaggerer. "If I told you that I have long believed that your father was my true friend through all, and that despair and hatred of myself have driven me to many a crime, you would not allow that to be any extenuation?"

"All this may be true," said Jack.

"If so, it is no more than just."

"I know," continued the Swaggerer, his brow wet with the dew of agony, "that if you are bent on killing me, I must fall, but I am not fit to die."

"As fit, I fear, as you will ever be," returned Jack.

"I plead for my life," cried the Swaggerer, sinking on his knees and raising his clasped hands. "I beg for it! Give me time to repent—another year—a month—a week!"

"Will you not plead, too?" asked Jack, turning to the Panther.

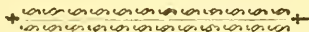
"It's a waste of breath," replied the Panther, sullenly.

"I am glad to find that there is a spark of manhood in one of you," said Jack. "Swaggerer, rise! You plead in vain to me. The oath I swore on board the 'Albatross' I will keep. The memory of that dread time is as strong upon me as if it were yesterday. It can never be effaced. How, then, can I rest while you live and walk the earth?"

"Will nothing move you?" asked the Swaggerer.

"Nothing."

Then the Swaggerer arose with a pallid face, and stood shivering like a coward on the scaffold awaiting the drawing of the bolt.



CHAPTER LXXI.

THE CHOICE MADE—A MAD FLIGHT, AND AN UNPARALLELED SCENE OF HORROR.

DURING the foregoing, Jack had never ceased to keep a wary eye upon his foes, and a hand ready upon his revolver, to use with all speed if there had been need.

But it was an almost needless precaution.

They had arms, but made no attempt to use them—nor did they think of having recourse to either the pistol or the knife. All their thoughts were fixed upon their impending doom.

"By what strange chance we meet here—" began Jack.

The Swaggerer interrupted him.

"It was not chance," he said.

"Well, how we have met, I know not," continued Jack, "nor do I seek to know. It is enough for me that we are here together on this strange night. Hark!"

He paused, for a noise like the grunt

of a beast was heard apparently high up in the air. Then the earth shook.

"I know what's coming," said the Panther, shuddering. "I've been in Terra del Fuego, Master Jack. We shall have horror enough afore long. Hades will break out of the earth. The hills and valleys will be rent like matchboards. I've seen it once," he added, with a wild stare, "and it's not in man to wish to see it again."

"For all that," said Jack, calmly, "we will keep to our own affair. I am here to avenge my wrongs, and nothing short of death shall turn me aside. Choose yourselves which of you shall meet me first."

"As he spoke, the deep grunt was heard again, and a fierce flash of lightning shot across the cloudless sky.

"It's coming!" cried the Panther,

starting to his feet. "Master Jack, you will not have time to kill us both."

Another flash of lightning, so bright that it temporarily blinded them, and the earth shuddered like a bridge over which a heavy train is passing.

"Choose between you," cried Jack.

"Let it be me, then," cried the Panther. "I'd as lief be dead as witness what's coming."

"Swaggerer," cried Jack, hurriedly, "stand there, and make no attempt to move until I bid you. Panther, we fight at seven paces. I'll measure the ground."

He walked backwards quickly, like one who has work to do and no time to lose. The Panther simply moved out and stood where Jack had been.

The Swaggerer, with blanched cheeks and white lips, stood a little back, with his hands hanging listlessly by his side.

"Are you ready," cried Jack.

"I've not loaded in two chambers," replied the Panther, looking at his revolver.

"Load, then, and be quick about it."

As Jack spoke, forked lightning leaped from several points of the compass at once, and darted into the centre of the sky.

Tremendous thunder followed, and the earth rocked like a cradle.

Jack staggered back a pace, and ere he could recover himself the Panther swung round and fled.

"The earthquake!" he shouted.

Like his namesake, the fierce panther of the forest, he sprang over the ground, and, in a moment, as it were, was a hundred yards away.

The wild terror that comes to men at such a time was upon him.

The Swaggerer caught it, too, and, with a fierce yell, bounded after him.

"Turn, you cowards!" cried Jack.

The deadly fear that was on them had not taken possession of the heart of Jack, and he thought they were simply flying from his vengeance.

Terrible as that was, they were flying from something more, and flying from it without hope of refuge.

So they sped on, even as beasts fly ahead of a forest on fire, without a thought of whither they were going—wildly, madly seeking safety.

Jack, crying on them to stop, followed

in pursuit, but though swift of foot, could not gain an inch upon them.

If anything, he was losing ground.

Both were out of pistol-shot, and to fire would be a waste of ammunition. Jack therefore made no use of his weapon.

To the left of where they were was a spur of the Black Mountain, a towering crag, black, barren, and forbidding.

Here, least of all, was safety to be found, but towards it the flying Panther made his way.

Lightning again, so fierce that the air seemed turned to flame, and the thunder that followed was deafening and appalling.

Jack pulled up for a few moments bewildered, and when he was again able to look about him, he saw the Swaggerer and Panther ahead, staggering about like drunken men.

Even then Jack would not leave his quarry, but hurried on, only to be speedily checked again by a strange shifting movement of the earth, as if it were a gliding trap of a stage.

It was impossible to keep his feet, and he staggered and fell.

Again upon his feet, to find the air alive with forked flame, and a great column of black smoke in the distance—the moon and stars no longer in the sky.

The lightning ceased, and a darkness that was as the darkness of the grave was there. Horrors were accumulating, but Jack kept on.

He could hear if not see his foes.

The Panther was shrieking like some wild beast in pain, and the Swaggerer answering him with the shouts of a madman.

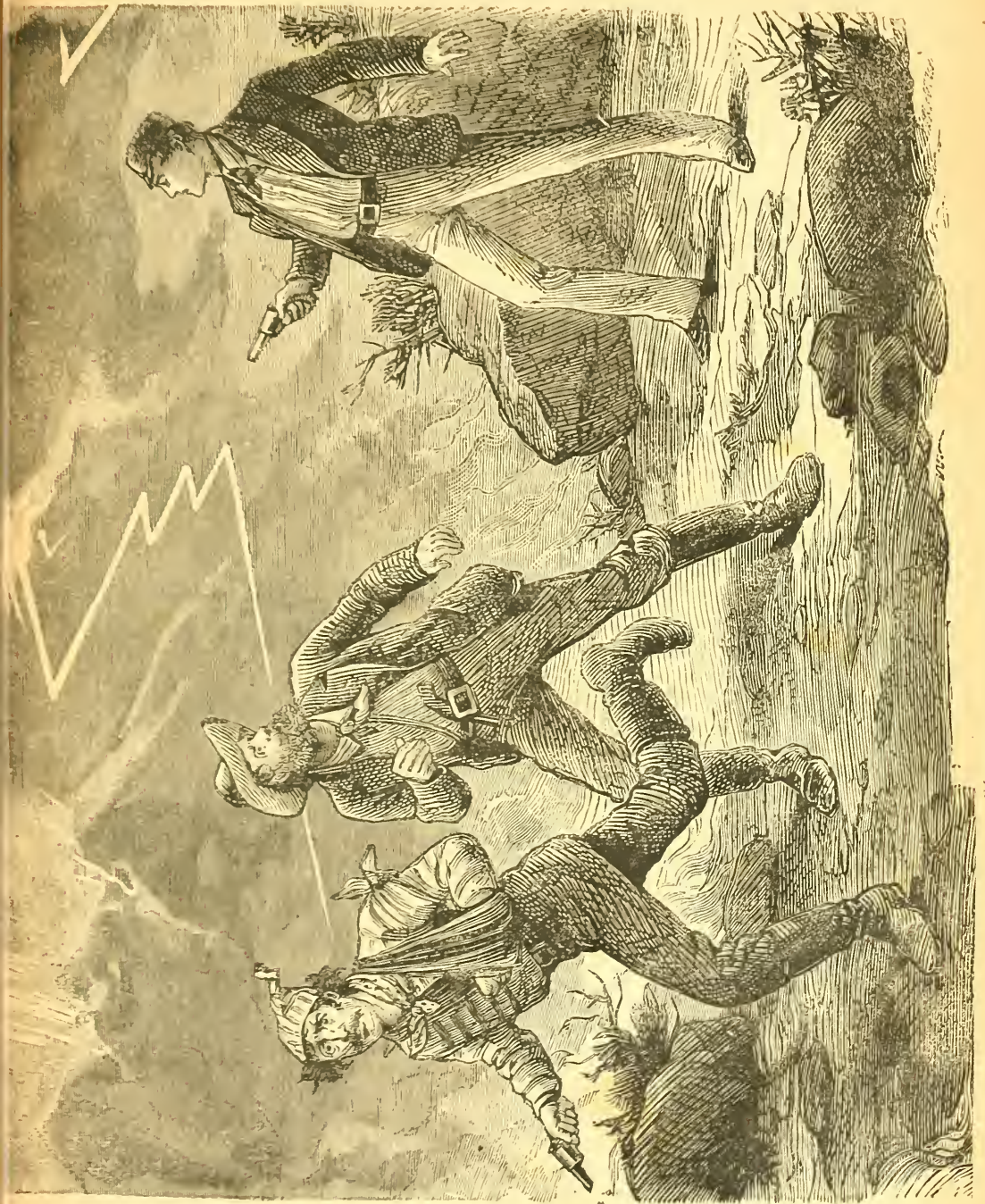
More lightning, vivid beyond description, and by its light Jack could see that all overhead was dense black rolling smoke.

From whence had come this appalling phenomena?

Stout of heart as he was, he quailed then. It was too horrible for mortal to endure without shrinking.

Darkness followed, and the thunder rolled horribly just over his head. In the distance there was the sound of rocks rending.

And now came the finish to the awful time.



"TURN, YOU COWARDS!" CRIED JACK.

The whole earth seemed to heave and roll like a great billow, then a wide opening, almost at Jack's feet, appeared, and flame leaped out. He staggered back, terror-stricken, but still with his head clear. Ahead of him he saw the Swaggerer and Panther, standing as if panic-stricken, with the glow of the red light upon them.

They were close under the huge spur of the Black Mountain.

It towered high above them, its face glowing with the red glare, its summit lost in the dense black smoke.

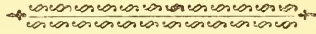
Suddenly it was rent in twain, fire leapt out of its midst, and with a roar

and a crash, that made puny all other sounds, it fell.

The Swaggerer and Panther were directly under it. Though all that happened was over in a moment, Jack took in every detail.

He saw the huge rock splitting, the flames savagely dancing, the terror-maddened men throw up their arms, the mighty mass bend over and fall upon them, crushing and burying them a hundred fathoms deep for ever.

He could bear no more himself. On every side the ground was breaking up, and fire and smoke rushing forth. With a gasp and a sob he fell and knew no more.



CHAPTER LXXII.

WHAT THE EARTHQUAKE DID AT THE SETTLEMENT—A VAIN SEARCH FOR JACK.

A WILD dawn broke after a night of violence and storm, its light falling on wreck and ruin.

The Silver Settlement, as a settlement, was no more. The huts lay mere heaps of wreckage; the little rivulet where the diggers used to wash their soil had disappeared.

Five children, three women, and one man lay dead. The rest of the people cowered together in terror on the plain.

The wildest and fiercest work of Nature known to man had been going on through the dark hours, and now there was a lull.

Save from the crest of the Black Mountain, which poured out fire and smoke.

A wind carried the smoke away from the trembling settlers, but the huge outpouring of the volcano was sufficiently appalling.

But it had more than ordinary terror for them. Two of their company were believed to have perished when the great eruption began within the earth.

Mrs. Deane had no hope of her husband living, but she it was who went about comforting the trembling women who had lost—nobody."

"The worst is over," she said, "we have nothing to fear now."

But it was not easy to reassure them. The dreadful experience of the past

night was a thing not to be forgotten during life. How, then, could it be buried in the waters of Lethe in a few hours?

How could they shut out the memory of that tremendous upheaval, of the rending of the earth, of the collapse of their houses, of the lightning, thunder, rumblings, fire, and smoke?

Not while they breathed and moved, and memory held its seat.

To the open plain they instinctively fled for safety, and found it.

Save the nine hapless beings, old and young, who lay crushed under the falling timber.

No camp-fire was lighted, no food being prepared.

Who thinks of the morning meal when they believe the crash of doom to be near?

Daylight was an hour old when four men were seen advancing from the mountain, and a cry of joy rent the air.

"They are saved!" shouted the distracted people.

"There ought to be five," said Mrs. Deane, and they were silent again.

Who was the lost one?

Doubt did not last long.

It was soon seen that the brave handsome lad who had come to avenge their wrongs and his own was the missing one.

Mrs. Deane ran forward to embrace

her husband, and as soon as she could speak she asked for Jack.

"Dead, I fear," was the answer.

"It's a certainty," said Ralph, with a stony stare ahead of him, and Jacob Sturmby groaned.

"He took the road for the settlement," continued the trapper, "and there's only one. We've come by it, and it's like walking over the cooling iron of a foundry."

"It's broken up in every direction," added Deane. "The Black Mountain has fallen. The whole ground is broken rocks. We had some hope that he might be among you."

"He's not been here."

"You fled to here for safety," said Deane.

"There are nine dead bodies among the ruins," replied Mrs. Deane.

They sat down, sad and silent, for a while. But their return had put a little life into the people, and the women began to prepare a fire.

Two of the men volunteered to go up to the old place for provisions, and brought back what they could find in a first search among the ruins.

After a sparing breakfast, Ralph rose.

"Where are you going?" cried Sturmby.

"I'm going up yonder to see if I can find any signs of him," replied the trapper.

"I'll go with you," said Sturmby.

"It's a waste of time," said Deane, sadly.

"It's miserable to spend it here," replied Ralph.

He and Sturmby set out, and they were away all day. The earthquake was over, and the volume of smoke from the Black Mountain subsiding.

In the afternoon a general move was made back to the settlement.

"If we keep a fire burning," said Deane, "they will know where to find us."

It was a sad task, putting the ruins into order, and estimating the damage; but the sight of the dead was the bitterest thing of all.

Crushed and mangled as they were, with one exception their faces remained uninjured. The little children looked as if they were asleep.

They laid them out on the hillside, and covered them with the branches that had fallen. Men were appointed to take their turn of watching by the dead.

It was a wise precaution, for ere sun-down the birds of prey were hovering in the air, and the howl of the prairie-wolf echoed in the woods.

Night had fallen when Jacob Sturmby and Ralph came in, utterly worn out. They had found nothing.

"We have been over the whole track, and found nothing but this," said Ralph, as he mournfully drew out Jack's cap from his breast; "the poor lad's gone."

"There's one crack in the earth a thousand feet deep," said Sturmby. "You can hear the lava still boiling over below. He fell in somewhere. It must have been awful for him to be alone at such a time."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Deane.

"There's a place to which this news must be taken," said Ralph. "Abel Newcombe will take it sore."

"And how will that pretty daughter of his bear it?" asked Jacob.

"It will break her heart."

"We cannot go too soon."

"Let it be to-morrow."

And when the next day came without any sign or intelligence of Jack, they set out to bear the dismal tidings to the house of Abel Newcombe, the Silver King.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE NEWS CARRIED TO THE NEWCOMBES—THE SILVER KING LEAVES HIS KINGDOM.

ALL things went well with Abel Newcombe.

Six months after Jack went away he had almost doubled his vast fortune.

The earth, in a manner of speaking, sent him up fountains of silver ore.

Mrs. Newcombe rejoiced with him, but Annie did not seem to care for

wealth. Early and late she would be abroad at intervals, always going in the same direction.

She sought the spot where she had parted from Jack.

Her wistful eyes would rest longingly on the track he had taken, and she would picture him returning, triumphant and buoyant.

"He cannot fail," she was always murmuring. "His enemies cannot conquer him."

But fear would come into her heart, and at times she would weep, and kneel and pray for him, always asking that he might come back to her "to-morrow."

But the morrows came and passed, and Jack did not come.

No word or message was possible.

Neither directly nor indirectly did she hear of him.

Then she began to grow pale and listless, and Abel Newcombe would grow anxious.

"I must give up work," he would say, "and take you from here."

"No, no," she would answer, "I do not wish to go yet."

So the father toiled on, the mother rejoiced, and Annie pined and longed for her absent lover.

At last, after a long and weary waiting, news came of him.

She was at the old spot one morning when two weary, stooping figures approached her—Ralph and Jacob Sturmby, bowed down with grief and fatigue.

Her keen eyes read their story, and with a face lily-white, she asked them if they had come from far.

"More than ten hundred miles," replied Ralph.

"Where is the old man you called Ben?"

"Dead."

"And your young master—brave Jack?"

They looked at each other and stood mute. She bade them speak.

"I am strong enough to bear it," she said.

"He is dead, too," said Sturmby.

"Did—did his enemies kill him?" she asked.

"No," replied Ralph, "they all perished together in an earthquake. They are buried in a grave deeper than man could make."

"Go forward, and tell your story to my father," she said.

Erect and quiet she stood while they passed by, watched them until they were out of sight, then threw herself down upon the ground.

"Oh, Jack, dear Jack, to think that I shall never see you more!"

Tears came to her relief, or she must have died. In a little time she arose, and walked to and fro.

When her eyes were dry, she went home.

A brave, strong girl.

What she thought or felt would be known only to herself. She did not carry her heart upon her sleeve.

She found her father and the two new arrivals in the kitchen. They were talking, but dropped their voices as she came in.

Her father rose, and put his arm around her waist.

"My pretty lass," he said, "you must bear it."

"I will try," she answered, simply.

"He was a brave and noble lad, but his was a stormy life, and it ended in a storm."

"A sorrowful life, with a pitiful ending."

"Aye, so 'twas. But bustle, and give our friends some food. They have need of it."

Annie laid some bread and meat upon the table, and left them. She was walking up and down outside when her father joined her.

"Lass," he said, "what's to be done now?"

"It must be borne," she replied.

"Have we not both said so?"

"It's not that, lass, I'm speaking of, but the money. Shall I go on making it?"

"Do you want it?"

"Not for myself."

"For mother, then?"

"No, she is content."

"Who for, then?"

"For you, my lass."

"I shall not need it," said Annie, with a quivering lip.

"Then we will close the works, and sell the mine," Abel Newcombe said.

"And can you sell it?"

"To-morrow, or in a week at latest. In seven days we can leave here."

Let us go, then," said Annie, "and take me far, far away from here. Let me never hear of the place again."

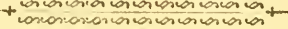
It so happened that Abel Newcombe had just received an offer for his ground from the agent of a mining company, and the man was not far away.

On the morrow he was sent for, and

a bargain was very soon made and concluded.

Ere the week was out the Newcombes were on their way back to civilisation, with their own men for an escort.

And Jacob Sturmby and Ralph were of the party, going to seek forgetfulness in a new life in the Old Country across the sea.



CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE SETTLER BY THE MOUNTAIN—FOUND—A BRIEF TIME OF DOUBT, THEN
LIGHT AGAIN.

ABOUT five miles north of the Black Mountain is a small but exceedingly fertile piece of land, amounting to about a thousand acres.

It was an oasis of verdure in a desert of rugged rocks, and many a traveller had paused there to rest and admire its beauty.

But the men who wandered through it were in search of the precious metals, which they knew could not be found there. In turn they all passed on, until one man with a wife and two children came.

The place seemed to suit him, and he built a log-house, in which they dwelt, and he set to work to till the ground.

It was already rich in fruit and herbs, and ere long he began to think of selling some to the hard-working diggers in the various settlements around.

So, on every other day, he was to be seen going forth, now in one direction, now in another, and coming back at eve with good dollars clinking in his pocket.

"It's better than digging," he would say, laughing softly, "more certain, and not half the labour."

So this wise man thrived, and was happy, and all who belonged to him had a joyous time in their chosen Eden.

One day the man set forth as usual, to go to one of the more distant settlements, on each arm a basket well laden with prickly pears and other fruits.

"I shall not be back until late at night," he said. "But what matters, there is a moon."

He kissed his wife and children, and they watched him wend his way to the

Black Mountain, round the base of which he had to go.

Then the woman went on with her household duties, and the children tumbled upon the greensward, and skipped about like young lambkins at play.

Late in the afternoon the woman heard a distant rumbling, and went out to see from what quarter the storm was approaching.

Not a cloud was in the sky.

"Strange," she murmured; "I am sure I heard it."

"And the children, standing wondering by her side, were sure they heard it, too.

Again and again before sunset she heard that mysterious sound, and a dread of something impending took possession of her.

"I wish my John were here," she said.

But he was not expected before the middle of the night, and ere then the earthquake had shown its mighty force.

Awestricken, she knelt by the open door, and saw the distant lightning, heard the great rocks rent, and watched the summit of the Black Mountain belch forth its flame and smoke.

The children, happily, slept. She was alone with her terror and misery.

When the great darkness caused by the mighty volume of smoke overhead came she could see no more, and went into the corner by the fire and prayed.

Slowly and wearily the hours passed, and the new day came, and with it to her great joy the husband whom she feared she had lost.

But he was not alone.

By his side, and assisted by him, was a youth, who looked like one who had seen death, and was being slowly brought back to life.

"Let him have our bed, Mary," said the man; "he's worn out; he must sleep."

The youth looked at the woman, and tried to smile his thanks, but even that effort seemed too much for him; so he was taken into the inner room, and there lay down.

He closed his eyes and lay still.

The man knelt down and listened to his soft and almost inaudible breathing.

"Not dead," he murmured, "and may not die. Poor lad! he's had a narrow escape."

Then the man rejoined his wife, and having again embraced her in the fulness of his joy, sat down by the fire and drank some tea she had hurriedly prepared for him.

"It's natural for you, Mary," he said, "to wish to know what's happened in the night."

"I've seen something of it," she said, shuddering.

"And I was in the midst of it," said the man. "I saw the earth split almost at my very feet. Great rocks fell by me, and I escaped. How I bore the terrors, I don't know."

"You thought of us at home, John."

"Aye, Mary, I did, and that must have borne me up. On my road I came upon this lad lying as one dead. By the glaring fires I saw and knew his face."

"Knew him, John?"

"Yes, Mary; this is the lad whose life I, in my desperation, attempted to take in New York. He forgave me, gave me money, and you know the rest."

"Can it be so?"

"It is, Mary, and we must not let him die. He saved all of us."

"He shall not die," said the woman.

And thus the sallow-faced man and Jack met again.

The debt incurred at midnight in a street in New York had been handsomely paid.

Jack gave to the man freedom and a chance of retrieving his honour, receiving back his life.

But for the sallow-faced man—sallow-faced no more, thanks to his

peace of mind and health-giving life—he must have perished in that awful night.

John Corbay was the name of the settler, and that title he will bear for the brief time we shall be with him.

Jack was very ill—as near utter prostration as living creature could be; but the devotion of his nurses saved him.

In two days he was able to sit up and converse a little.

His first words were of his friends.

"Have you heard nothing of them?" he asked of Corbay.

"I have heard no news of anybody," was the reply. "I have not been out since you have been here."

"Is the Silver Settlement far away?"

"Eight miles."

"No more; I may soon be able to get there and make inquiries."

"If you are no worse to-morrow," said Corbay, "I will go and make inquiries for you."

"Why should I trouble you?"

"It is a matter of business. I have fruit to sell."

On the morrow he went, and learnt that the others had been saved, but that they believed Jack to be dead, and had carried the belief to his friends.

Harold Deane told Corbay this much, and expressed his regret that they had been in such haste.

"How far have they gone?"

"Many days' journey."

"Then I cannot go," said Corbay; "but something must be done."

"I will go," said Deane; "but meanwhile simply say that his friends are safe, and, when well enough, will come to him."

With this message Jack was satisfied, and it was, without doubt, wise to give him rest at any cost; further excitement would have killed him.

Meanwhile Harold Deane acted like the thorough good fellow he was.

Having secured a horse, he rode with all haste on the track of Ralph and Jacob Sturmby.

Five days and nights he had no other shelter than a tree, and on the morning of the sixth day arrived at Abel Newcombe's nest to find the bird gone.

The new possessors were making their arrangements with the accustomed excitement and bustle.

It was not without some difficulty that he extracted from them the information he needed as to the route taken by the Newcombe family.

"You see," said the new manager of the new works, "you may be the leader of a lot of rowdies for all we know."

"I am an educated Englishman," said Deane, "a Master of Arts."

"That's nothing," said the manager, coolly; "if anything, it's against you. Swells like you don't find it easy to get a living out here, and take to rough ways to get bread."

"Thank you, my friend."

"No offence. It's true, as you must know. But I think I can trust you. Bear due east—don't waver half a point, and you will come upon the Newcombes. They are heavily waggoned, and travel slowly."

"With hearty thanks, Deane rode on, and late on the next day overtook the Newcombes on the plain.

He told his story, and the waggons were put about for where Jack lay.

"Time doesn't matter to us, does it, lass?" said Abel Newcombe, and she answered with a glad smile.

They went back to Jack, and Harold Deane rode on ahead to break the news of their coming gently to him. He did it with the tact of a gentleman, and Jack received no shock.

He was still very weak when they arrived, but the sight of Annie appeared to have a very healing influence over him.

"I promised to come to you," he said.

"And I have come to you," she answered. "What matters—so that we have met?"

They were very young lovers. Jack was not more than nineteen, but he looked at least ten years older, and, as Mr. Newcombe remarked, a little waiting would not harm them.

"It is my intention," said Jack, talking over the matter with her, "to go to England and study."

"For what?" she asked.

"I have not decided yet."

"You shall study to please us," said Mrs. Newcombe, "and when you are twenty-one you shall marry Annie."

"But I am poor," he urged.

"All the better. If the rich always marry the rich, what will become of the

poor? No, Jack, when we die, Annie will want somebody to look after her money, and you are the lad of our choice."

And so Jack said no more, wisely accepting the happy lot in store for him.

It was fully four months ere he could be pronounced fit to travel, so tremendous had been the wear and tear of his life, culminating in that never-to-be-forgotten night; but at last he was well and strong again.

A very happy time had been spent in their little Eden, and when the morning came for them to leave, John Corbay and his wife felt as if the sun of their lives were going to set.

But there was joy in store for them.

Abel Newcombe called the pair aside, and asked if they would like to go as far as New York with them.

"I can't go there yet," said Corbay, hanging his head.

"You can," said Abel Newcombe. "I know your story. Don't wince, man, we are none of us too honest under strong temptation. I know your story, I say."

"How, then, can I go there?"

"I have been in communication with your employers. The sum due to them has been paid."

"By whom?" asked the startled husband and wife together.

"By me. I don't want thanks—the sum is nothing. I can spend as much any day before breakfast. Here is an acknowledgment from your late employers, declaring there to be no debt between you. Now let us go in to breakfast."

He refused to hear anything about thanks, and laughed at the absurdity of being repaid at any future time.

"We are in your debt, man," he said; "say no more."

Two hours later, the whole party were homeward bound.

* * * * *

Jack's story is told. The sorrowful beginning, and the glad ending.

If you would know more of him, you must go to a sweet spot in Devonshire, where he now lives happily married.

Only a few years of such happiness does he know, for he is not yet twenty-

five, but already people begin to speak of him as a man of mark.

His physical beauty, his bravery, his determination, his honesty, will all help him, and the world will yet learn more of the hero who so terribly avenged the foul murder of his father and brother.

His enemies are no more; his friends live, and their faith in him is strong and constant.

Ralph, made warrener, would slay a man who speaks ill of his master, and

Jacob Sturmby has only one ideal of true manhood.

Wealth and happiness are his, and what does brave Jack Boldheart want more?

Forgetfulness of the past.

That he will not have in this world; but the grim pictures of the past are growing dim, and let us hope that ere he reach his prime he will be able to look back upon his torrid youth as a bitter dream. And with this hope, we close the stirring adventures of

Jack and his Seven Foes.

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